

# Doctoral Project Approval Sheet

This doctoral project entitled

NO FOREIGNERS IN THE KINGDOM:  
THE REVITALIZATION OF ST. JAMES AME ZION CHURCH

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requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

has been accepted by the Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary  
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NO FOREIGNERS IN THE KINGDOM:  
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SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE  
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OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

MARLYN ROCHON BUSSEY  
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## ABSTRACT

### **No Foreigners in the Kingdom: The Revitalization of St. James AME Zion Church**

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Doctor of Ministry

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The purpose of this project is to explore the causal factors of church decline through the perspectives of church leadership, membership, community engagement, social factors, political and economic climate, denominational polity, and human choice to determine if church decline is fatal. It is argued that, though these factors contribute to church decline and eventual death if not addressed, a church can be revitalized to new life when appropriate measures are taken. Church revitalization is a long, tedious process but when a pastor and congregation determine to commit the time, effort, and resources necessary to bring the church back to a healthy state, it is possible to do so.

The thesis was tested at St. James AME Zion Church in San Mateo, California, a local church that had been in a slow yet steady decline for several decades. This is evidenced by the fact that the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of the most senior members are no longer members of the church, few new members have joined, and the church focus turned inward to protect the remnant who remained.

An examination of Scripture confirms that decline has never been an expectation for the Church of God. The expectation was and remains, church growth and expansion. The hypothesis that church decline can be reversed is tested by developing and implementing a revitalization process for ministry at St. James, creating a new church within an established, historic structure. The process began by performing an environmental scan in every area of ministry, creating the supporting framework for changes made thus far by the revitalization team, a combination of staff and lay leadership.

This project will necessarily continue after publishing, but what has been concluded thus far is that St. James is already experiencing new life, new membership, and a bright hope for the future.

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Content Reader: Daniel White Hodge, Ph.D.

To my parents, R. C. (deceased) and Mary P. Rochon, who instilled in me that anything is possible with hard work and dedication; to my husband, Michael, who has supported me in every endeavor I have undertaken, and to my children, Monica and Lindsay, my biggest cheerleaders. I appreciate your love and support more than words can express. To my siblings, Natalie, Olivier, Rodney, and Rhonda, who have encouraged me to press on.

I appreciate and love you. I give God the glory for the family he gave me, for collectively, you have been the wind beneath my wings.

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I would like to thank Bishop Dennis Vernon Proctor, who saw the gift in me, and by divine direction assigned me to pastor St. James AME Zion Church. I want to thank Bishop W. Darin Moore and Bishop Staccato Powell for your encouragement along the way. I also want to thank my ministry colleagues who cheered me on from the sidelines and prayed for me. To Lindsay, who pushed me to give this project only my best and would accept nothing less as you proofed my work and listened to my musings. To Dr. White Hodge and Dr. Smith, for an incredible cohort journey that has reshaped me in innumerable ways. And to my St. James family for their love, support, and invaluable contribution to this project. I thank God for allowing me the privilege of serving as your pastor. Together we have succeeded in giving St. James new life. I am humbled by your trust and faith in my ability to lead you into newness.

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PART ONE

MINISTRY CONTEXT

## INTRODUCTION

For the first hundred years of existence, The African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME Zion) was a force for freedom to be reckoned with. Due to untiring sacrifice and labor, the Bishops of the church led this newly formed denomination into explosive growth and expansion. It grew from one church congregation in New York to thousands of congregations on five continents.

The next fifty years of Zion Methodism, however, were marked by the Episcopates of the Church leading via a church maintenance model. With a few gains in the area of civil rights, the church leadership was lulled into thinking equality would continue to be the order of the day. This proved to be a fatal error. Strong church growth and expansion continued in the overseas work because oppression there was still overt. Belief in a higher power was solace for the people. The only remnant of the tremendous growth of the first century of the church in America was in the area of social activism. As a result, The AME Zion Church plateaued. Bill Henard explains, “A church will find itself in one of the five phases of the Life Stage. These include birth, growth, plateau, decline and death . . . we must remember that the people are the church . . . along with their attitudes, actions and behaviors that demonstrate where the church finds itself on its Life Stage.”<sup>1</sup> The strength in social activism in The AME Zion Church continued through World War I and World War II, as she supported the soldiers and families of members who enlisted and were drafted into the Armed Forces. Again, as so many had in the Civil War, Blacks defended the country who never chose to defend them. The Black church

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Henard, *Reclaimed Church: How Churches Grow, Decline, and Experience Revitalization* (Nashville: Fortress Press, 2018), chap. 7, sec. 1, Kindle.

remained in the forefront of social activism throughout the triumphs of the Civil Rights movement. “‘The civil rights movement was a church movement,’ said Gratz. The leaders were pastors, and the planning and organization meetings were church services, with prayers, hymns, sermons and offerings.”<sup>2</sup> This remnant of strength in The AME Zion Church allowed it to remain a powerful voice through the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s even though the church had plateaued.

Sadly, over the last seventy years, Bishops have worked to stave off a steady decline in episcopal authority, in congregational autonomy, in social activism, and in membership. The victories of the Civil Rights movement seemed to be won and the Black church believed all was well for those inside the church. What they did not care enough about were those who were outside the church. Henard writes, “Any church can start out right and have the right goals, vision, and even strategy. The real test occurs when the church has to expand its leadership base and ministry concepts. It either decides to develop ministry to meet the needs and mission to reach the world, or it chooses to hunker down and take care of itself. When a church decides to become a survivor, it unfortunately sets the stage for death.”<sup>3</sup> As a result, the number outside the church, especially in the fifty and underage groups, has surpassed those who are inside. Though the AME Zion Connection is flourishing overseas with new churches being planted weekly, because the people still value their faith and relationship with the organism of the church, domestically, it is struggling to survive.

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Gilbreath, *Birmingham Revolution: Martin Luther King Jr's Epic Challenge to the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2013), 51.

<sup>3</sup> Henard, *Reclaimed Church*, chap. 3, sec. 1, Kindle.

It is due to the slow yet steady decline of membership in the AME Zion Church over the last seventy years that I have chosen to carry out this project. St. James AME Zion Church (St. James) in San Mateo, California has been experiencing decline over the last three decades. The decline has many causes: an exodus out of the area due first to redlining and unaffordability of housing, the influence of drugs and alcohol into the Black community, lack of economic opportunity, gentrification in the community surrounding the church, ministry not meeting the needs of the membership or the community, and loss of zeal for those outside the membership of this small church. This project presents a strategy to halt membership decline and promote sustainable practices to create healthy growth at St. James Church.

Many dying churches have forgotten the reason they gather for worship. St. James AME Zion Church, now in its one-hundredth year of existence, has the distinction of being the first African American church in the city of San Mateo, California. It also has a history of ecumenicity even during the turbulence of the civil rights era, being the only ethnically diverse church in San Mateo during this time period. Yet over time, St. James also succumbed to many of the same factors which have caused so many other churches to fail. As a result, the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of this family church are absent, with few attending any church. New, unchurched people were not choosing to join the ranks and there were very few visitors on Sunday morning. These factors contributed to the church turning inward to protect those who remained and therefore entering the church life stage of decline.

The factors leading to church decline are many and while it is not necessary for all factors to be present for decline to occur, it has been well documented that the vast

majority of church closures have several factors in common. Bill Henard, in his book *Reclaimed Church: How Churches Grow, Decline, and Experience Revitalization*, explains:

Churches in need of revitalization usually have an identity problem. With the change in culture, the neighborhood, the age of the congregation, and their life stage position, churches struggle with who they are. In order to revitalize, churches must answer these three questions regarding their existence and their identity: Who does the community say we are? Who does the church think they are? Who is the church really?<sup>4</sup>

These questions may be hard to answer for a waning congregation, yet the work cannot commence until the congregation faces the reality of how the community sees the church.

The goal of this project is to develop and begin implementation of a revitalization strategy to reverse the decline and promote new growth, recapturing the lost generations of family members as well as welcoming all others who wish to join St. James in ministry and service. The strategy will be sustainable for future generations, the church will experience healthy growth, and no one will feel like a foreigner: excluded, unwelcome, and devalued.

Chapter one introduces the reader to the history of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church as well as what it means to be a connectional church. The church polity and practice as it pertains to the function of the local church are examined, as is the history of the city of San Mateo. The intersectionality of the history of the city and the history of St. James is also discussed. Finally, this chapter reviews the role the socioeconomic and demographic history of the city plays into the decline of the church.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., chap. 12, sec. 1, Kindle.

Chapter two reviews literature to assist the reader in better understanding the nuances of the Black church in general and the AME Zion Church specifically with regard to polity, core values, traditions, mission, and liturgy. It examines several models for church revitalization and growth and how they might be applied in the revitalization effort at St. James Church.

Chapter three discusses the biblical pillars for church growth using the mandate of Jesus Christ as given in the Great Commission. The early church is studied as a model for growth as well as a reminder of the factors that can lead to decline. The scriptural foundations for growth as described in the Book of Discipline of The AME Zion Church are applied as they relate to traditions, practices, and liturgy that may be contributing to decline. The theological and biblical tenets for revitalization form the basis upon which the strategy is developed.

Chapter four is concerned with the preparation of the congregation for revitalization. Studying the theological and denominational tension between growth and decline, as well as introduction of best practices in the field of church growth and revitalization is the foci of this chapter. The goal of this chapter is to develop the strategy and timeline to be used in the process of revitalization.

Chapter five is the implementation chapter. It details the changes put in place to create a church replant in an existing building. With the assistance of the revitalization team, every area of ministry: administrative functions, financial accounting, plant management and updating, order of service and worship experience, music ministry, and outreach and missions are examined and repurposed to promote growth. The project is evaluated at each major benchmark to ensure continued buy-in from the congregation and

to ensure changes are producing the desired result of increased visitors and new members. Assessment tools include an online survey to capture feedback from the church leadership, from those who have left St. James, and from members' relatives whose spiritual formation was at St. James but who are no longer attending a church anywhere. The survey also captures input from those who regularly attend and those who are unchurched.

The scope of the project does not allow for full implementation of the revitalization strategy within the set academic boundaries. However, the foundation for change will be fully implemented and several major milestones will have been reached, by the time of submission. The summary and conclusions stated in the project will serve as a blueprint for the work that remains. Following the plan of action will bring the project to completion in the next three to five years.

CHAPTER 1:  
HISTORY OF THE AME ZION CHURCH

American Methodism was founded in 1760 without support or authorization from England. The first Methodist societies were multicultural with people of European and African descent worshipping together in unity. The John Street Methodist Episcopal Church in New York City, the oldest Methodist Church in America, was one such society. Problems arose when the church began to become popular to the general population of New York. Like the temptation in the Garden of Eden, people who were not part of the original congregation ate the fruit of bigotry and when they joined the church, they infected the White church members with racism. As a result, the John Street Church, previously multicultural, harmonious, and an example of what unhindered worship looked like, became another church that practiced the worship of bondage. William Walls writes, “But as the church grew popular and influential, the prejudice of caste began to engender Negro proscription. As the number of members increased, the racial friction and proscription increased, which finally overcame the tolerance of the

Negro members.”<sup>1</sup> The Black membership was desirable to the John Street Church because of the support they provided the church and for the pious lifestyle evident in the people of the African diaspora. Their value, however, could not override the racism which had infected the body.

Black clergy and membership were severely hindered in exercising their gifts and graces in preaching, in the service of communion, and in general worship, and were relegated to the balcony and second-class citizenship. The Black leadership decided to break free of this bondage by separating themselves completely from the John Street Church who, while not mistreating them physically, effectively denied them the religious privileges available to their White brethren. With James Varick serving as the leader and spokesperson, they exited the church in mass, heads held high. Walls explains, “In the formation of any organization that gains potency, there is practically always one who provides inspirational leadership and directional prudence. From its beginning, this independent movement of the AME Zion Church was largely influenced and structured by James Varick.”<sup>2</sup> It is a bold step to reject the known for the unknown under any circumstances, but in 1796, this brand of wholesale rejection of institutionalized racism was monumental.

The AME Zion Church was thereby established in 1796 as a response to the institutionalized racism and bigotry of the John Street Church. This new society, coined the Freedom Church, was determined to worship freely, without racial discrimination,

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<sup>1</sup> William Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church: The Reality of the Black Church* (Charlotte: AME Zion Publishing House, 1974), 43.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

and to have as its focus civil rights, social activism, education, and collective responsibility for marginalized people of all ethnicities—especially those of the African diaspora.

The church continued to grow and develop as a society between 1796 and 1822. Because the White Methodist church was still attempting to influence the operation of the new denomination, the members voted to exit the Methodist Episcopal Church altogether. They published their own Book of Discipline, complete with a founder address. This document solidified The AME Zion Church as an independent denomination in 1882, separate from both the Methodist Episcopal Church and the John Street Methodist Church. Only the terms Methodist and Episcopal, referring to the doctrine and governance they would continue to abide by, were retained. The term African was added to the denominational title for the purpose of identifying the denomination as one with leadership from the African diaspora while at the same time, welcoming all people.

The new denomination known as the AME Zion Church was a symbol of pride for those of African descent and had as a hallmark a keen sense of connectedness to the motherland, Africa. The denomination founders believed that a deep cultural identity, marked by worship in community, was imperative to maintain and nurture as a means of building strong traditions and deep roots of its own. They stood on the shoulders of their African ancestry and took their rightful place as children of God. Michael Battle, in his book *The Black Church in America: African American Christian Spirituality*, expresses, “This is the great power of the Black Church in America: it sees beyond itself and has

practiced a communal spirituality which invites the possibility of disparate identities to find common ground.”<sup>3</sup>

The intelligence and ingenuity of the founding fathers of the AME Zion Church are impressive. They created Articles of Incorporation, a denominational charter, guidelines for the itinerant nature of church leadership, and ordination guidelines for deacons. The term Zion was added to the name to memorialize the first church built in 1800 which was named Zion Church. It is known today as Mother AME Zion Church in Harlem, New York.

It was the goal of the denomination founder, James Varick to, in every way possible, create a faith system modeled after the pious lifestyle of John Wesley. This was the impetus for the ecclesiastical form of church government and the connectional structure of the church and its polity. It remains the pride of Zion Methodism that the founding fathers created both freedom principles and ecclesiastical principles as the foundation of the denomination.

The young denomination continued to grow and expand across America, becoming well known as the freedom church. Walls, in *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church: The Reality of the Black Church* affirms, “In the days of slavery, the Zion ministers were generally leaders of the anti-slavery movement and their pulpits were always open to anti-slavery lectures. If there was nowhere for an anti-slavery meeting to be held, it was a well-known fact that the local Zion Church would be made available.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Battle, *The Black Church in America: African American Christian Spirituality*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 45.

<sup>4</sup> Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church*, 148.

The doors of this church were never closed for those who fought against oppression. This sentiment helped make the Zion church a force to be reckoned with from its inception. The flagship church of the denomination, Mother AME Zion Church and several other churches in the connection served as stations for the Underground Railroad, assisting well-known freedom fighters. Many have now been internationally recognized for their contribution to the emancipation of enslaved people.

Throughout the reconstruction era, The AME Zion Church lived up to its reputation as a church who spoke truth to power on behalf of the powerless. The AME Zion Church, hence the Black Church, logged many successes during the Reconstruction Era. Having coined herself “the freedom church” by this time, the AME Zion Church expanded its reach into the South. It was a social justice force to be reckoned with as a result of the fall of the confederacy. Walls writes,

The distinguishing characteristic of our church is freedom . . . Her very prominent position on the subject of slavery kept her out of the South until the power of that system was broken; but she was among the first to send missionaries to oppressed people when the way was open, as she had been among the foremost advocates of emancipation in the dark days of slavery, and also foremost in sheltering and feeding the panting fugitive on his way to a land of freedom.<sup>5</sup>

The freedom church grew tremendously, adding additional church societies from New Jersey to California. Bishop James Walker Hood became the first Black Assistant Superintendent of Education in North Carolina and founder of Livingstone College, proving yet again the ability of the leadership of the AME Zion Church to stand toe to toe with White clergy leadership.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 177.

As the church continued expanding, beautiful edifices such as those at Washington Metropolitan AME Zion Church in St. Louis, Missouri and Broadway Temple AME Zion Church in Louisville, Kentucky were erected. By 1864, the denomination had thriving churches in the South as well. In the late 1800s, the AME Zion Church stretched her wings into Africa and began establishing churches on the continent. The first church was planted in Brewerville, Liberia and the work of ministry through this denomination in Africa has grown consistently throughout the years.

In the early 1900s, the AME Zion Church expanded into the Caribbean and West Indies. Following both World Wars, as well as during the civil rights movement and the Jim Crow era, the church experienced substantial growth as large numbers of Black people migrated to all parts of America. The denomination became the foundation upon which the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) would grow, with many Zion churches providing meeting spaces, participating in the organization of rallies and marches, and providing political leadership when necessary in addition to spiritual leadership. Ecumenicity accompanied the migration as the AME Zion Church partnered with the National Council of Churches, Church Women United, and the World Council of Churches, among others. This church continued to be “the freedom church” not only in name but in action.

### **The AME Zion Church Comes West**

The AME Zion Church had mission churches established in California before it was an official district within the connection. Reverend John Jamieson Moore, an

experienced and successful pastor from the East, came to the West and established the First AME Zion Church in San Francisco, California in 1852. Several other churches were also planted in the area under the leadership of this dynamic pastor.

Bishop J.J. Clinton came West and organized the California Conference which is the flagship conference of the Western Episcopal District of the AME Zion Church on January 10, 1868. Ten ministers accompanied Bishop Clinton and were assigned to societies. Three churches were represented at this inaugural Annual Conference: Zion Church (now First AME Zion Church in San Francisco), First AME Zion Church, San Jose, and Zion Church in Napa, California. Bishops Loguen and Brooks were assigned to the new district, however both died during the ensuing quadrennium and the work of the West Coast languished due to lack of leadership. By 1881, only the original three churches remained. Reverend Alexander Walters was then sent to San Francisco and provided the leadership necessary to strengthen the established work and to grow the area as well. The century ended well with nine churches, sixteen preachers, and 650 members.

By 1900, the California Conference included the cities of Los Angeles, Oakland, and San Francisco. In addition, the states of Oregon and Washington as well as the territory of Arizona, with thirteen well-established churches were added to this conference. Over the next several years, the church expanded, and additional conferences were organized: the Oregon Conference in 1910 which was renamed the Oregon-Washington Conference in 1916, and the Southwest Rocky Mountain Conference in 1920, which includes Southern California. The church continued to grow to over half a million members with 3,612 church edifices and more than 2,500 ordained clergy

persons.<sup>6</sup> The General Conference of the church created an eleventh episcopal district, and included the region previously known as the California Conference within the new district. This new district included all of California, Washington, Oregon, Alaska, Colorado, and Arizona. It later became the twelfth episcopal district until the denomination decided at the General Conference in 2000, to change all the districts from numbers to names. The twelfth episcopal district then became the Western Episcopal District and the California Conference became its own Annual Conference, which includes only Northern California. Southern California became the Southwest Rocky Mountain Conference. Alaska, Colorado, and Arizona became their own Annual Conferences and Oregon and Washington were combined into one Annual Conference.

Not much growth occurred in the California Conference between 1980 and 2016. The freedom church was lulled to sleep by the gains of the civil rights movement and slipped into maintenance ministry, from the episcopal level down to the local church. Pastors had one responsibility: to ensure their financial obligations were paid by the time of the annual conference. There was no requirement for ministry growth, interaction with the community, or a focus on missions. However, under the present leadership of Bishop Staccato Powell (as of January 2020), five new church plants have been established in the California conference and nine new church plants have been established in other areas of the episcopal district. Additional cities are being surveyed for feasibility of church plants. The current Bishop has deemed maintenance ministry unacceptable. Presiding elders must plant churches. Pastors must increase church membership, create ministries that

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<sup>6</sup> William Wallls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church: Reality of the Black Church*, (Charlotte: AME Zion Publishing House, 1974), 226.

impact the community in a transformative way, and are required to tithe 10 percent of all income monthly rather than fund-raising to meet financial obligations. Churches must be an integral part of the community they are serving. Cultural relevance, biblical-centeredness and transformational ministry are the new standards of practice.

The California Conference is comprised of two districts. The reasoning for the creation of two districts within the California conference was geographical: churches sprinkle the landscape from Hanford to Stockton, then west to Union City, California. The overall distance from the farthest edges of the California Conference is in excess of 250 miles. Splitting the Conference into the Central Valley District and the Bay Cities District cut the mileage requirement by two-thirds. The Central Valley District spans from Hanford to Sacramento, while the Bay Cities District spans from Vallejo to Union City. This is important because there are two supervising ministers known as Presiding Elders, one assigned to each district who must travel to the churches they are responsible for supervising. The division of the Conference into two districts made this traveling responsibility much more feasible since the presiding elders must travel to each church in their district four times per year to hold quarterly conferences. There are eleven churches in the Central Valley district, which equates to forty-four trips in the ten-month span of time that makes up an annual conference year. The Bay Cities district has ten churches, which equates to forty trips per annual conference year.

The Bay Cities District of the California Conference established in 1968, consisted of nine churches until 2018. A tenth local society was planted in 2018 to meet the spiritual needs of the monolingual Spanish-speaking community. Of the churches in the Bay Cities District, three have been stand-outs over the years: First AME Zion in San

Francisco, the largest and oldest church in the district, Greater Cooper AME Zion, the second-largest church with the most ministries, and St. James AME Zion, the most civically and ecumenically active church in the district.

### **San Mateo and St. James AME Zion Church**

Members of an Ohlone Indian tribe were the first inhabitants of the city of San Mateo, having lived in an expansive area now within city limits. The tribe lived in this area at least 4,000 years before explorers first arrived on the Peninsula.<sup>7</sup> In 1793, the San Mateo Creek became an outpost for the mission fathers in San Francisco with the purpose of establishing a church on the San Francisco Peninsula Mission. The outpost was the first building built in San Mateo by non-natives.

Between 1887 and 1920, San Mateo morphed from being an unorganized village to an unincorporated town. The boundaries for the town were set in the north at Peninsula Avenue, including Coyote Point. The San Francisco Bay lined the east, Ninth Avenue marked the southern boundary, and County Road lined the west. Between the time of incorporation and the turn of the century, new businesses began to change the landscape and many of those buildings have been restored and still stand today.

From the mid-1890s to 1920, the physical, social, and cultural fabric of San Mateo changed. The 1906 earthquake took its toll on churches, livery stables, and other businesses, but 1906 was also the year the town experienced rapid growth. Thousands of San Franciscans now homeless, moved into the new subdivisions in the city. San Mateo

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<sup>7</sup> Mitchell Postel, *San Mateo: A Centennial History* (San Francisco: Scottwall Associates, 1994), 52.

became home to the largest Japanese population in the county by 1906, though they experienced hate crimes and harassment by the Anti-Japanese factions. Japanese residents experienced blatant housing discrimination in the early part of the century. Mitchell Postel reports, “While no Oriental quarter formally existed, it was established practice among bankers and realtors that no Japanese resident could obtain a loan to purchase a home outside of the area now known as North Central San Mateo. Clearly, discrimination was very much a reality before 1941.”<sup>8</sup> North Central San Mateo is still home to a large Japanese-American population.

The African American population in San Mateo, still in its infancy, suffered similar restrictions before the war. Japanese and African American residents had more in common than not and lived together in harmony along with Jewish residents in the same area of the city. The citizenry of San Mateo established the first churches in 1864: St. Matthew Catholic Church and an Episcopal church. The roots of community life in North Central San Mateo, however, are traceable to the establishment of two churches: St. James AME Zion Church and Pilgrim Baptist Church. This was a tight-knit community. When their Japanese residents were forced into internment camps, their African American neighbors took measures to ensure their property and belongings were kept safe until their return.

The first African American church, St. James AME Zion Church, was organized and is the oldest historically African American church in the city of San Mateo and in San Mateo County. It was the first meeting place for the San Mateo Chapter of the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 167.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and served as the centerpiece of the North Central community. The church met in homes and by 1927, a building was erected at 803 Monte Diablo Avenue and the church was given its official name. In 1938, the church moved to the present location, 825 Monte Diablo Avenue in San Mateo. The second historically African American church, Pilgrim Baptist Church, was built on the corner of the same block a few years after St. James.

St. James was organized in San Mateo by Reverend J.B. Holmes and a young University of California student named Reverend Bond. Very little is known of the early days of struggle except services were held from house to house, and the Congregational Church was located at Tilton and San Mateo Drive in San Mateo. In 1927, the Reverend L.R. Kinard was assigned to San Mateo. Probably some of the most remarkable works in the history of the church were done under the administration of Reverend Kinard. The original church and parsonage stood on the property where the King Community Center is now located and was built by the pastor, congregation members, and community. The land grant was gifted to the church by a supportive community member.

The steady progress of St. James in the early years is directly related to the succession of capable ministers assigned to the work. Each played an important role in maintaining the integrity of the church, expanding its facilities, and enlarging its influence in the community. From 1936 through 1941, under the administration of Reverend Rufus A. Cooper, the church building was moved from its park site in 1938 to its present location with the new land parcel again being gifted to the church. The church was raised and the basement (social hall) was built, along with many other improvements.

St. James Church has been a church of activism since its inception. Its membership was more highly educated than most of those who migrated west, so they were among the professional rank rather than the domestic ranks. Doctors, nurses, social workers, educators, and others made sure the church was active in moving agendas and laws forward to benefit the African American community as well as other oppressed people of color. Committees within the church focused on the political landscape, kept well informed, and ensured the membership exercised their right to vote once the right to do so was voted into law.

St. James Church and the Congregational Church of San Mateo, a White congregation, enjoyed partnership and collaboration long before it was socially acceptable for differing races to engage in this way. Between 1940 and 1960, the two churches formed an ecumenical group called The Circle of Concern. The purpose of this group was to address issues of concern for all people in San Mateo, regardless of ethnicity. They wrote letters, attended meetings, and held town hall meetings to keep concerned citizens abreast of changes they were fighting for. St. James also partnered with the Universalist Unitarian Church in San Mateo, a majority White congregation.

In 1966, Reverend Rufus A. Cooper was returned to St. James. Under his inspired leadership, Christian concern and good will for all people was promoted. After the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, there were a thousand high school and college students who decided to march on City Hall. Concerned the situation was going to become unmanageable, Mayor John Murray called on the pastor of St. James, Reverend Rufus Cooper, to help calm the troubled youth and restore order. Reverend Cooper was well-known in the community and believed in ecumenicity and participation

in social justice issues. As a result of his involvement in assisting the mayor and law enforcement, St. James was fire-bombed. The mayor and the community came together to provide the necessary resources to repair the sanctuary. Reverend Cooper continued to be a friend to the community, city officials, and law enforcement as he strove to be part of the social justice solution during the protests during the Vietnam War and the upheaval and racial unrest at the College of San Mateo.

The church continued to flourish under the pastorate of Reverend Ronald L. Rogers. A graduate of Livingston College, Reverend Rogers, a young man himself at the time, brought many young people into the church and developed ministries designed to draw young people and their families to the church. Unfortunately, the church hit a plateau from which it never recovered after Reverend Rogers was moved to a new pastoral charge in 1976. Maintenance ministry became the norm for succeeding pastors.

Postel writes, “While some African Americans were native Californians, between 1910 and 1970, approximately six million African Americans migrated from the deep south.”<sup>9</sup> They started new lives in the North, Midwest, and in the Western states of the United States where they could escape the horrors of the Jim Crow era and segregation, sanctioned and supported by the Southern states. Many moved north to New York, west to Chicago, and far west to cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Mateo, and San Jose where they found better opportunities to educate their children, meaningful work, and satisfactory housing. This mass migration out of the Southern states has been aptly coined the Great Migration.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 142.

Many of the African American migrants served as domestics for the wealthy citizenry who chose to own summer homes and estates in San Mateo. Domestic work paid the bills but came with its own brand of oppression and servitude. This did little to bolster the feeling of worth and dignity. Those with professional aspirations moved west as well, in hopes of getting a piece of the American dream. Dr. James Hutchinson, for example, born in 1923 in Shreveport, Louisiana, aspired to become a medical doctor and was among the six-million African Americans to migrate to San Mateo to fulfill his dream. Though many obstacles in the form of blatant racism and discrimination faced him, Dr. Hutchinson persevered and became the first practicing medical doctor of African American descent in the City of San Mateo. He is also the second-oldest member of St. James AME Zion Church, is still an active member in church, and is still practicing medicine. There were others determined to be entrepreneurial, like Gladys Norton who moved with her husband Elbert from Taylor, Texas in 1947. She was a licensed daycare provider who started a home daycare to care for other children while raising her own. Mrs. Norton took care of ten to fifteen children at a time from toddlers to high school aged and only charged what families could afford to pay. She cared for hundreds of children before she retired.

Eve Simister writes, “Many others relocated in the San Francisco Bay Area for work opportunities in the military.”<sup>10</sup> San Mateo County offered much to soldiers as Presidio Army Base, Treasure Island Naval Base, Alameda Naval Station, and Moffett Air Force Base were all within a fifty-mile radius of San Mateo. Racism, quite prevalent

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<sup>10</sup> Eve Simister, “The African American Great Migration and San Mateo County,” *La Peninsula* 15 (Spring 2016): 1- 3.

during the 1920s and 1930s, was a major barrier to equal opportunity in the workplace, as the terror of the Southern states found its way to California. Postel explains, “A public membership drive for the KKK was launched in 1924, when the San Mateo Times carried a front-page headline ‘Klu Klux Klan’ Seeks Members in San Mateo.”<sup>11</sup> Yet, while many other industries rejected workers from the African diaspora due to overt racism or fear of being too racially liberal, the military necessity gave Black people a concrete way to earn a living and support their families. The military shipbuilding industry in particular, drew many African Americans to the Bay Area. Serving the country as civilian workers or as military personnel was the best option available especially for those with limited education and resources. For those who enlisted to serve and defend their country, sadly, their country did little to nothing to defend them or protect them. Segregation and prejudice remained alive and well in the armed forces and across America. San Mateo, California was no exception and job opportunity was only one of many areas of life where racism presented barriers to equality.

The lack of restaurants willing to serve African American customers was another indication of prejudice. There was not a single eat-in restaurant for African American customers in San Mateo until Noah Williams, an African American chef, opened Noah’s Cafeteria (later changed to Noah’s Ark) on South B Street in 1923. The restaurant was also an additional source of employment to the Black community. Sadly, the Great Depression caused the restaurant to close its doors in 1932. The history of this city confirms it was shaped to maintain control over those who migrated to San Mateo.

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<sup>11</sup> Postel, *San Mateo*, 180.

San Mateo, incorporated as a town, was determined to maintain a small town feel even as it became more well known. However, there came a boom of growth and expansion between 1920 and 1940. The population of the City of San Mateo more than tripled from 5,979 to 19,403 inhabitants.<sup>12</sup> As subdivisions were built to meet the demand for housing, new businesses moved in as well. However, those who desired housing and those who started businesses were of the same mind as the native sons of San Mateo, desiring to keep their political agendas in line with their Eurocentric beliefs and practices while completely ignoring the growing ethnic and socio-economic diversity in the city.

During World War II, San Mateo had two USO stations: one for White soldiers and one for Black soldiers yet all young men, regardless of ethnicity, were drafted into the military to assist in fighting the war. This was also the time period in which the town became politically powerful due to its prominence in the county. Civic organizations such as the Elks, Masons, Lions, and others chose San Mateo as their headquarters which served to give the town a new level of appeal it had not previously enjoyed.

Economic conservatism was also prevalent throughout the history of the city. Some of the wealthiest San Franciscans were attracted to San Mateo once the railroad service was operational. The city became a favorite location to build homes because of the warm, balmy weather. Because of the ease of access and the demand for high-end housing, real estate development became a very popular business enterprise. It provided a major source of wealth to companies as San Mateo developed from a town to a city.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Not everyone was included in the economic boom. Racial discrimination in San Mateo was not easily identifiable on the surface but most certainly existed and became painfully evident when trying to locate housing. Government-sanctioned redlining was the norm until 1963 when the California Legislature passed the Rumford Fair Housing Act which prohibited race-based housing discrimination and restrictive covenants.<sup>13</sup> Eleven years later in 1944, however, Proposition Fourteen passed with nearly two-thirds of the popular vote, reinstating housing discrimination which was overturned by the Supreme Court in 1967. The North Central neighborhood of San Mateo where St. James is located was the only area in San Mateo where people of color (African Americans, Japanese, and a few Mexican families) could purchase homes, and many did so during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Jack Foster, Jr. relates,

Today, no one under 50 can imagine that a person could be denied the right to buy a house, simply because their skin was Black. Prior to 1960, discrimination was the rule more than not. The Rumford Fair Housing Act was passed by the State of California in 1963 and prohibited discrimination in the sale of housing. Proposition 14 qualified for the ballot in 1964, and passed with 65 percent of the vote, effectively voiding the Rumford Act. It ruled that anyone could sell or rent his property to anyone he wanted to, and the state could not interfere. The US Supreme Court voided Prop 14 in 1966.<sup>14</sup>

After World War II, African Americans began to actively fight for their rights. They demanded the hiring of Black teachers in the school system, succeeding when two were hired. The San Mateo chapter of the NAACP got involved as well by establishing a credit union in the late 1950s to provide loans to African Americans when traditional lending institutions would not lend to them.

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2017), 261.

<sup>14</sup> Jack Foster, Jr. *The Development of Foster City* (Bloomington: Xlibris Corporation, 2012), 71.

Over the next three decades, the African American community made small, yet steady strides in becoming integrated into the fabric of San Mateo politics and government. African Americans were hired for professional positions at an increased rate. Claire Mack, an African American woman whose family moved to San Mateo during the Great Migration, became the first African American Councilwoman and mayor of San Mateo in 1991. More recently in 2007, Dr. Samuel Johnson, an African American male, served as Superintendent of the San Mateo Union High School District.

Political conservatism in the 1960s was central as the desegregation of the school system was discussed. Though San Mateo officials did not admit to any ethnicity being limited to a particular neighborhood or area of the city, when the demographics of the schools were evaluated, it was clear depending on the neighborhood, some schools were majority Black and Asian while others were majority White. In October 1965, bussing students for the purpose of desegregation was adopted and implemented in February 1967. At the time in the school district of 521 teachers, only nine were African American, thirteen were Asian, and six were Latinx.<sup>15</sup> In response to the obvious inequity, the San Mateo Elementary Teachers Association passed a resolution which called for full desegregation of all schools and more minority representation on the school board and in the teaching ranks.

Many cities in California felt the effects of the Great Depression with an influx of people, long soup lines, and destitute people milling around. San Mateo, however, did not suffer the effects of the Great Depression as did many other areas in California. Though

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<sup>15</sup> Postel, *San Mateo* (San Francisco: Scottwall Associates, 1994), 179.

business suffered, the outlook was not bleak. Employment was available in the healthcare, transportation, banking, automotive repair, and other industries. Civic organizations such as the Kiwanis, Rotary, and Lions continued to meet and the educational, law enforcement, and first responder systems were stable. Horse racing at Bay Meadows was a major boost to the economy. Real estate development continued to prosper, yet new subdivisions priced out some while allowing others to enjoy the convenience of nearby services such as grocery, drug, and clothing stores. Hillsdale Shopping mall built to support the Hillsdale subdivision, is an example. Foster writes, “Bohannon was the prototypical big-time developer. He created whole communities, hundreds of houses at a time, with consideration for community, recreational, social and educational needs.”<sup>16</sup> His developments, however, were built only for the White population of San Mateo on the wealthier, west side of El Camino Real.

The majority of the property and land in San Mateo was held by only a few wealthy families who had financial means to keep purchased summer estates and other properties in San Mateo for use as summer and winter homes intergenerationally. Those who migrated to the area as many African Americans did in fleeing the Jim Crow South, typically fulfilled the role of domestics for the wealthy. The demographics of the city shifted in the latter part of the twentieth century when African Americans moved out of the area due to the cost of living in San Mateo. There was, by design, a conscious effort to keep economic wealth within certain ethnic groups and within certain neighborhoods—and it remains in place to this day.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 233.

## **The Effects of Demographics and Economics on the Church and City**

The demographics of San Mateo shifted substantially between 1970 and 2010. According to United States Census Bureau statistics, while the general population of San Mateo increased from 78,991 in 1970 to 97,207 in 2010, the percentage of people of color, with the exception of the Latinx population, decreased. The African American population in the Bay Area fell from 550,000 of the overall population in 1970 to 250,000 in 2010, a decrease of 6.4 percent. In San Mateo, the African American population decreased from 2.6 percent to 2.4 percent during the same time period. The Asian population increased from 14.9 percent to 18.7 percent, and the Native American population decreased from .2 percent to .1 percent, while the Latinx population increased from 20.5 percent to 26.6 percent.<sup>17</sup> It is noteworthy that the same types of work employing many African Americans from the time of the Great Migration through the Civil Rights era are now the jobs many in the Latinx population hold: service industry jobs in hotels, restaurants, and domestic work as housekeepers, house cleaners, landscapers, and nannies. For African Americans of San Mateo hoping to find more affordable housing, additional options became available. Foster City, four and a half miles from San Mateo, Redwood City, eight and a half miles from San Mateo, and East Palo Alto, fourteen miles from San Mateo became more diverse and began building additional subdivisions.

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<sup>17</sup> United States Census Bureau, "QuickFacts San Mateo City, California," <http://census.gov/quickfacts/sanmateocitycalifornia>.

Once Foster City was developed, and because the real estate developers, Foster and Sons, insisted the sale of homes in Foster City be sold without discrimination based on race, those who had managed to purchase in the North Central sector of San Mateo sold their homes and moved into the newly constructed Foster City subdivision. This was the case with several families belonging to St. James. Foster explains,

As the civil rights movement was building, we decided that our position in Foster City should be unequivocal. There must be no discrimination in the sale or rental of houses. Once it was made clear, there was no need to discuss it anymore. I don't think that sales in Foster City were affected in the slightest and, in fact, our market was broadened when minorities learned that they did not have to play games in the purchase of a house in Foster City.<sup>18</sup>

Other families either opted to stay in San Mateo or to purchase in another redlined area, East Palo Alto.

Gentrification was exercised in San Mateo in a deliberate way. African Americans, Asians, Latinos, and Jews experienced housing discrimination. "Housing availability in San Mateo was determined more by decades of public policy decisions that excluded poor people and people of color. By making it impossible to meet housing needs, these same decisions have propelled the current crisis."<sup>19</sup> Early development of this city was shaped by the idea of segregation. Restrictive homeowner association covenants were created, and the sale of property was contingent on the race, ethnicity, and religion of the borrower.

After the Fair Housing Act of 1968 was passed into law, new tactics to perpetuate residential segregation were employed. Communities modified their planning and zoning

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<sup>18</sup> Jack Foster, *The History of Foster City* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris Corporation, 2012), 72.

<sup>19</sup> Postel, *San Mateo*, 234.

laws to continue redlining practices. Cities could zone for large, single family homes with extra-large lot sizes to allow for spacious lawns in some areas and then price the homes to exclude smaller homes and apartments that low to moderate income people could afford. Property values in neighborhoods of color were also depressed with discriminatory intent as well as forcing those of low to moderate income into neighborhoods within the county flood zones.

These kinds of practices had a negative impact on African American families who attended St. James because the choice was between moving away from the community where the church was located or settling for the dilapidated neighborhood near the church. People of color were excluded from the peninsula altogether, or at a minimum, excluded from the neighborhoods offering better quality housing. However, when the Foster City planned community was developed by Jack Foster, Sr. and Sons in the 1960s, it offered several prominent St. James families a wonderful alternative: brand new homes in an ethnically mixed community they could access. Housing discrimination was prohibited by the Fosters as a condition for development of this new peninsula community. Though Foster City is only four and a half miles from San Mateo, this new city represented the beginning of the transition of St. James from a community church to a commuter church. As African Americans moved from San Mateo to Foster City, Latino families moved into the North Central sector, and the community around the church also began to shift.

These factors have had a lasting effect on the membership of St. James Church. Housing prices have continued to rise to the extent that a two-bedroom, one-bathroom home in the neighborhood of the church now sells for close to a million dollars. This has

caused the rental market to increase dramatically as very few people can afford a down-payment on such expensive property, much less a monthly mortgage and property insurance. People of color continue to be priced out of the market, with the majority of new homeowners over the last ten years being of Caucasian and Asian descent. In addition, over the last ten years, Silicon Valley has expanded from the San Jose area north to San Francisco. This new area covers the entire San Francisco Peninsula and the jobs associated with Silicon Valley are by and large, jobs that require a college education and beyond and technical skill sets that many people of color do not possess. Companies that hire and the jobs that are available, which could help one afford to live in San Mateo, are not available to many people of color. Therefore, to find housing, people are forced to move away from the peninsula to inland cities. Several members of St. James live sixty to seventy miles away from the church and drive in weekly for service. This necessitates an entirely different type of planning process for ministry and mission that must necessarily incorporate not only the needs of the new residents of the neighborhood, but the distance other members travel to be part of the faith community at St. James. The past challenges of redlining, economic suppression, and gentrification continue to affect the participation level and the total membership of the church.

PART TWO  
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In the New Testament, Jesus told the parable of a fig tree that was not bearing fruit as expected. The tree had been in that condition for three years and the owner of the vineyard ordered the tree to be cut down. The keeper of the vineyard, however, said, “Sir, leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down” (Lk 13:9).<sup>1</sup> This is the desire of every pastor who is called to undertake the work of church revitalization. No human knows if a revitalization strategy will be successful, but like the keeper of the vineyard, the hope is that with the right amount of care: digging up that which is causing harm and fertilizing with new programming, standards, ministries, and mission, the church will again be healthy and fruit bearing. This hope represents the crux of the project herein undertaken and this chapter examines whether or not a church that appears to be dying can be revitalized to new health so it can again bear fruit.

The challenge of attempting revitalization is immensely important to me because the denomination of my birth and my choice has entered what appears to be the death

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quoted is from the New International Version, unless otherwise noted.

phase of church life. AME Zion Churches all over America are struggling to remain open, to keep people in the pews, and to remain relevant in a post Christian world. Yet, the Word of God states it is possible for what appears dead to be revived. This project is dedicated to developing a strategy for the revitalization of one declining local church within the denomination, St. James AME Zion Church in San Mateo, California.

Because the St. James Church is part of the Black Church, this chapter reviews the literature that speaks to the history of the Black Church in America. It will also examine the AME Zion Church as the parent church of which St. James is a local body. Several areas are discussed by Bishop William Walls, Raphael Warnock, and Thabiti Anyabwile, experts in the field of the Black Church. Polity, tradition, core values, mission, and liturgy are discussed as addressed by the author of each book reviewed. This chapter then turns to proven growth and revitalization models by examining several experts in the field of church revitalization from a broader perspective: Brian Croft, Bill Henard, and Mark Clifton. Through this examination, these leading theologians give insight into how, what appears dead or dying can indeed be brought back to health and wholeness.

***The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety & Public Worship* by Raphael Warnock**

The basic issue Warnock seeks to address in his writing is to sort through, clarify, and reset the mission and nature of the Black Church because he recognizes a dysfunction based on the conditions under which the Black Church was birthed as well as how it has operated. He writes,

From the fledgling communities behind the gospels to the classic debates of Nicaea and Chalcedon through the Reformation until now, Christology and ecclesiology have always been done together so that those who are informed by a memory of Jesus must wrestle simultaneously with the implications of that memory for their own mission. That is the church's burden. Yet, for reasons of history and theology, the burden carries with it an extraordinary freight, and the question has itself a distinctive resonance when the church is built by slaves and formed, from its beginning, at the center of an oppressed community's fight for personhood and freedom. That is the history of the Black church in America and the theological prism through which any authentic inquiry into its essential mission must be raised.<sup>2</sup>

It is clear from his writing Warnock has a deep love and appreciation for the Black Church, as well as a desire to see the church of his choice maximize her potential. To accomplish this goal, there are tough questions that must be asked and answered to form a foundation from which generational sustainability can build. One such question is what the core values of the Black Church are. Warnock explains,

The Black church was born fighting for freedom. The fact is evidenced by the resistance and testimony of spaces, signified in the oppositional witness of pioneers of the independent Black church movement and confirmed by the work of scholars across disciplines . . . The freedom for which the Black church has fought has always been both internal and external, expressing itself politically and spiritually, embracing Black bodies and souls.<sup>3</sup>

The author sees the mission of the Black Church as being muddled, attempting to hold as a primary focus both the mission of liberation and the ministry of social activism. He believes this confusion has caused the church to lose the power and effectiveness from which it was born:

The Black Church Freedom Movement must be regarded as a prime expression of resistance to slavery . . . a form of rebellion against the most accessible and vulnerable expression of white oppression and institutional racism in the nation: the American church. By opting to separate rather than to accept the racialized

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<sup>2</sup> Raphael G. Warnock. *Divided Mind of the Black Church* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

polity, seating patterns, preaching and practices of white churches, Black Christians were also positing an egalitarian understanding of the church, exposing by contrast the contradictions of a white church that was just as racist as the society in general.

Exposing the heresy and racism that exists within the body of Christ is the only way to regain the power and effectiveness of the Black Church.

Warnock believes the way to create the strength and influence the Black Church was meant to have is by strengthening the scriptural foundation and remembering the reason it came into existence:

The oppositional witness of the Black church against racism and on behalf of justice has not always been consistent, nor has the nature of its response been the same. Because it is still a participant in and a product of the American Protestant ethos with its attending theological assumptions and cultural secretions, the Black church, the church born fighting for freedom, has had a divided mind. This is why the radicalism of the Black church has ebbed and flowed in dialectical fashion in the face of varying political and socioeconomic challenges before and after the Civil War.<sup>4</sup>

He contends the church relaxed its stance on equality during the post-civil war period, and in doing so, further weakened its position as a force for change. This caused the church to stall and then plateau on the forward movement it had been making because segregation intimidated the Black Church. Warnock continues by writing, “Following reconstruction and the birth of Jim Crow laws in the South and the North, the Black church lost its zeal for freedom in the midst of the new structures of white power. Black churches adopted, for the most part, the theology of the White missionaries and taught Blacks to forget the present and look to the future.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 93.

The Black Church in America was fooled into thinking that the best way to protect the souls of people was to get them to think about a better life in life after death, once the pain of this life was over. In so doing, Black preaching unwittingly adopted the same preaching modality as the preachers in the days of slavery. It was an oppressive gospel, a gospel that bound people to limits and lack, with no hope for any semblance of equality and freedom in the here and now.

An additional challenge according to Warnock is the fact that the church touts social justice and activism but in reality, the lack of action has hindered the effectiveness of the Black Church. He observes:

Black churches are often burning up with piety and emotionalism while those who are concerned about social change operate outside the church, believing it is not in the nature of the Black church to be where the action is . . . the Black church should have become a revolutionary power for liberation, but with few exceptions it has become a dispenser of spiritual aspirin.<sup>6</sup>

The Black Church, according to Warnock, must take on many different roles to fill all the voids created by being a marginalized organization from its inception. “As a socializing agent, it must act and provide support for other institutions to act on behalf of the Black community in the area of health, political economy, and the preservation of Black culture. For if the Black church is not busy making life more humane for Black people, it denies its right to be.”<sup>7</sup> The reasoning of Warnock holds true for the AME Zion Church and for St. James as part of the Zion connection. When the church was actively participating in

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 106.

social justice, it was vibrant, and the pews were full. The Zion church was living out its creed as the freedom church. Once that zeal was lost, so was the power of the church.

In the spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Warnock agrees the goal of the preacher in preparation and delivery of sermons should be holistic, focusing not only on the future, but also on the present reality of those who depend on their faith to support them in their daily lives. Warnock explains, “Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the slums that cripple the souls—the economic conditions that stagnate the soul and the city governments that may damn the soul—is a dry, dead, do-nothing religion in need of new blood.”<sup>8</sup> The church, in polity, practice, preaching and ministry, must necessarily focus on the betterment of the life and conditions of those it seeks to minister to.

The love Raphael Warnock has for the church which nurtured him drives his desire to see the relationship between Black theology and the Black Church come together in harmony so the Black Church can become what God intended it to be. Warnock declares, “Part of what the Black Church needs is a deeper understanding of the relationship between the ministry as social activism, embodied in the civil rights movement, and the reality of a liberationist faith rooted, not only in the Black church history, but in Scripture.”<sup>9</sup> When the Black Church is able to integrate the necessity for social activism as part of the gospel of liberation that is part of the fabric of those from the African diaspora, the Black Church will reach its full potential as the change agent

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 177.

God intended. The history of the Black Church proves that the capability exists for the Church to change the world, but it requires that the Church continue to possess and exhibit the same moral courage that created progress in the past.

***Reviving the Black Church: A Call to Reclaim a Sacred Institution* by Thabiti Anyabwile**

Reviving the Black Church focuses its attention on the reclamation of what many are terming dead and dying churches. The premise of the book is that a return to the sacredness of worship is what is necessary to breathe new life into a dying or dead church. Like Warnock, Anyabwile believes the Black church was born to be at the forefront of social justice:

The myth of the Black church being the storehouse of the nation's moral compass was created largely during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. But the history indicates that it is more accurate to suggest that there have been individuals who were products of the historical Black church that were on the cutting edge of justice and equality issues than to offer the institution as pushing the nation en masse to live up to the ideals to which it committed itself in 1776.<sup>10</sup>

The work of church revitalization is a hard, long, and necessary work to undertake according to Anyabwile, if life is going to be breathed back into a church so badly broken, it appears all hope is gone. Anyabwile writes,

If the Black church is dead, as Glaude asserts, concern over its role as an instrument of liberation is very much alive. For all her problems, I believe the Black Church can live again. In fact, the reports of her death may be greatly exaggerated. There remains significant signs of illness and weakness: immorality among pastors and leaders, false 'gospels' preached and taught, materialism, unclear direction and mission drift, an overemphasis on entertainment and the sensational, confusion about gender roles and the widespread absence of African

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<sup>10</sup> Thabiti Anyabwile, *Reviving the Black Church: A Call to Reclaim a Sacred Institution* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2015), 4.

American men. The Black Church, like all churches has her problems. But hope also abounds.<sup>11</sup>

Hope abounds because all one needs to do is review the history of the Black Church in general and the AME Zion Church specifically, to recount the fire and determination of the founders. The challenge is that the fire has become warm embers and needs to be stoked back into flame. The leadership must return to the root system which was a determination to have equality in every sense of the word, for those forced to live on the margins of life.

Pastors are quitting, churches are being sold to the highest bidder, and the sheep are being scattered. People are fighting with their pastors and tensions run high.

Leadership expectations are unrealistic. According to Anyabwile, this is a major cause of ministers walking away from their call:

Ninety percent [of pastors] feel they are inadequately trained to cope with ministry demands and said the ministry was completely different from what they expected before they entered . . . Not surprisingly, fifty percent of new ministers will not continue in the ministry just five years later. Only one of every ten ministers will actually retire in some ministry capacity. Each year an estimated four thousand new churches begin and each year approximately seven thousand churches close. Monthly more than 1,700 pastors left the ministry and more than 1,300 pastors were terminated by their local church, many without cause.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to insufficient training, unrealistic workloads and misplacement in pastoral ministry are also primary causes for ministerial burnout. In the Methodist tradition, where pulpits are assigned by episcopal leadership, it is not uncommon to appoint new ministers that are not yet capable, educationally or emotionally, to churches with little more than

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 106.

the hope that the new pastor will be able to figure things out. This formula supports the claim of the author.

The issue of leadership preparation is also a concern, because, for ministry to be revived, the sacredness of Scripture must again be placed as the centerpiece of ministry.

When entertainment takes center stage, very likely authority gets vested in individual experience. What comes to matter most is how individuals and the church feel about this or that issue. Celebration and catharsis, pleasure and pain-avoidance become the aims of the Christian life. While emotion remains one gift God has given for expressing life and faith, making emotion central to the life of faith can actually weaken the church and reliance on God's Word.<sup>13</sup>

He continues his discussion on pastoral leadership by also examining genuine gifting as opposed to skilled showmanship, noting that character and integrity are hallmarks of the pastoral call. In a very real sense, churches can only be as healthy as their leaders.

Anyabwile explains, "The Black Church has long valued charismatic leaders capable of organizing and inspiring the faithful. From time to time, we have found that some men capable of inspiring congregations lack enough character to hold office. Whenever a Black church must choose between character and gifts, she must choose character."<sup>14</sup>

This is especially important when itinerant ministry is the method by which pastoral leadership is determined. "Memory becomes its currency. Its soul withers from neglect. The result is all too often church services and liturgies that entertain but lack a spirit that transforms, and preachers who deign for followers instead of fellow travelers in God. Consequently, the church loses its power because it becomes alienated from the moment

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 153.

in which it lives.”<sup>15</sup> Not only does the church lose its power, but it develops pastors who do not understand the scope of service they are to supply a congregation. The entertainment factor can and does cause preachers to want only that aspect of ministry which cheats the congregation out of the full pastoral experience.

Anyabwile has a much broader definition for what being a Black Church means than any other author read for this project as, he also includes White denominations with a substantial number of Black people in their membership.

To some extent, we can define the Black Church by referring to the historical Black denominations—National Baptist, Progressive Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal (AME), African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ), Church of God in Christ (COGIC), and so on. But increasingly, we must recognize that one part of ‘the Black Church’ exists as predominantly Black congregations belonging to majority white denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention or even African American members of predominantly white churches. Clearly ‘the Black Church’ is not one thing. Black churches come in as many flavors as any other ethnic communion. Indeed, many African Americans have experiences with many parts of the varied Black Church world.<sup>16</sup>

This is significant because the Black Church was birthed out of the White Church and is therefore, the source of the dichotomy Warnock addresses.

The perspective of this author on church outreach and inclusivity is also notable as it offers a reason for the exodus of young people and their families from the Black Church today.

The communities that are difficult for the African American church to reach are the very places hip-hop culture lives. It reaches out, touches, affirms, and communicates with the pain, struggles, and realities of these communities. The face of the Black church has changed; its membership does not consist of many in the hip-hop generation . . . The institutionalized church didn’t nurture and lead the hip-hop prophetic movement. As the class divide within African American

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 6.

community widened, the Black church continued to become a middle-class bastion.<sup>17</sup>

The church rejected this generation because they did not understand their theology which necessarily connects the divine with the pain and suffering of those desiring freedom. It also rejected the very appearance of hip-hop culture and the hip-hop generation rejected a church that did not want them or understand them. The church is in its current state because it would not embrace this generation.

Anyabwile believes only one thing will revive the Black church and it is for the Word of God and belief in that Word to become paramount to all else. He writes, “The Lord Jesus taught the earliest followers, the apostles, where genuine spiritual life comes from when He said, ‘I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life’ (John 5:24 NIV), Life comes from hearing the Lord’s Word and believing it.”<sup>18</sup> A church built on any other foundation according to Anyabwile, will eventually die, “For nothing can sustain a spiritual people other than spiritual food.”<sup>19</sup> Without this spiritual food and the power of the Holy Spirit, revival is not possible. According to Anyabwile, entertainment has no lasting value nor does shallow preaching or social programming without the leading of the Spirit. “The only force capable of reviving the Black Church in whatever area she needs revival is the Spirit of God animating the Word of God. Apart from a Spirit-enabled recovery and submission to the Word of God, there can be no hope

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 28.

of lasting revival among any of God's people."<sup>20</sup> Unless the church changes course and focus, it will one day simply be a monument to a time in history.

***The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church: Reality of the Black Church* by Bishop William Walls**

This seminal work, written by one of the foremost early fathers of the church, Bishop William J. Walls, is his legacy to the denomination. This history traces the church back from before the inception of the denomination through 1974. This book looks specifically at the AME Zion denomination as a parent to the local church, St. James AME Zion in San Mateo, California.

As has been verified by both Raphael Warnock and Thabiti Anyabwile, Bishop Walls also reports that the AME Zion Church was birthed fighting for freedom, but more specifically, it was born out of the choke-hold White churches had on those of African descent. He writes,

As we read the history of these turbulent and struggling days, we see that all the Black churches were born in white congregations. East and West, North and South. Organized Christianity is the major thing the Black race got out of slavery second to which was the English language. Slavery was a big price to pay, however, especially when we remember the boon of free civilization was granted to other branches of humans without the blighting prolongation of slavery.<sup>21</sup>

Because the founder of the AME Zion Church, James Varick, was Methodist, this new denomination followed the teachings of John Wesley and the polity of the Methodist faith. According to Walls, "The most essential phases of the cultivation of deep consecration and religious experience in original Methodism were class meetings and

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>21</sup> William Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church: The Reality of the Black Church*. (Charlotte: AME Zion Publishing House, 1974), 21.

love feasts. They were great influences in the rapid growth of the Methodist movements.”<sup>22</sup> The class leader system still exists within Methodist polity, and when used correctly, is a very effective method for building community through small groups.

It is significant to note women were invited into egalitarian partnership early in the history of the denomination. As Walls states, “Women’s integral role in the AME Zion Church is synonymous with primitive Christianity. It was voted at the General Conference of 1876 to strike out the word ‘male’ in the Discipline. This permitted women for the first time to vote in the local church and have greater participation in the Quarterly and Annual Conference.”<sup>23</sup> Leadership of Zion ministers, both male and female, according to Walls, was notable as it spoke to the character and commitment of those willing to stand up for what they believed. They were in the forefront of the anti-slavery movement from the time the denomination began:

In the days of slavery, the Zion ministers were generally leaders of the anti-slavery movement and their pulpits were always open to anti-slavery lectures. If no other house could be obtained for an anti-slavery meeting, it was well known that the Zion Church could be had. The doors of this church were never closed against one who wanted to plead for the oppressed.<sup>24</sup>

The fact that so many AME Zion houses of worship are closed except for Sunday is one of the primary reasons the zeal for freedom fighting has waned. Churches must be used as community meeting places to be embraced by the community as a valued asset.

The emphasis on personal holiness, integrity of character, and a singular focus on freedom caused the church to grow tremendously in the early years. Walls identifies that

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 138.

“The success of the AME Zion Church during the Reconstruction era was a marvel. The distinguishing characteristic of our church is freedom . . . Her very pronounced position on the subject of slavery kept her out of the South until the power of that system was broken; but she was among the first to send missionaries to a long oppressed people when the way was open.”<sup>25</sup> This growth pattern continued for the first hundred years of the church. Many ministers bolstered social justice movements such as the NAACP as well as other civic organizations of similar function. Walls writes, “The Black church in general and preachers in particular have bolstered this movement through the years . . . The Black preacher has served as president of city, town, state and regional chapters, and the AME Zion Church preachers have been many among those deeply involved in the citizenship, in building and maintaining this organization.”<sup>26</sup> St. James, as an example, was the first meeting place of the San Mateo Branch of the NAACP. Several former pastors of the church as well as some lay members, served in leadership of this organization over the years.

Developing capable preachers and capable congregants was important to the AME Zion Church. The church has always had an emphasis on education. As Walls points out, “The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church has sponsored institutional education practically from its beginning. The first little frame church built and dedicated to God in 1800 also had accommodations for a school. The schools of New York City operated from the churches and funds were granted to the city by the state legislature for

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 515.

such encouragement.”<sup>27</sup> When higher education became a necessity, Walls states “The urgent necessity for a theological and collegiate institution had been increasingly felt throughout the connection for several years . . . The North Carolina conference . . . moved in the same creative spirit to establish a permanent education center.”<sup>28</sup> As a result, the AME Zion Church built and operates Clinton Junior College, Livingstone College, and Hood Theological Seminary in North Carolina. There are also several schools and colleges established under the AME Zion flag in Liberia in West Africa.

The pride Walls feels when writing about his beloved Zion is the reason this denomination must remain alive and healthy—for its work is not yet done. Bishop Walls eloquently states, “Whoever has marked the progress and achievements of the AME Zion Church cannot doubt that the men who founded this branch of God’s militant host, were men raised up for the times and work which resulted in the formation of one of the greatest religious organizations and most potent forces for race uplifting and development in existence.”<sup>29</sup>

The foundation laid for the denomination is still filled with potential to be a force for the uplift and development of marginalized people if our original purpose as a church is reclaimed and lived out, across the denomination.

### ***Solutions for Dying and Divided Churches by Brian Croft***

Churches are opening every year. They are also closing every year to the extent there is a net annual loss of churches in America. Brian Croft provides practical guidance

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 303.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 497.

from his years of experience focused on a balanced biblical approach rather than the gimmicks of a pragmatist or the narrow biblical view of the purist as a means to achieve effective church revitalization.

When a church has been around for half a century or more, inevitably there are long-term, older members still in these churches who long for their church to return to its former glory. Croft explains, “These are typically the ones who have kept the struggling church open for many years but are also the ones who are commonly resistant to needed change. Because of this, these longtime faithful members can appear to be more of a hindrance for renewed life instead of a benefit.”<sup>30</sup> At its lowest point, St. James Church had fifteen members. Of the fifteen, only three members were active in ministry, while everyone else attended without impact. This is typical of churches in decline where very few people influence the membership as well as the leadership. This is typical in a declining church according to Croft:

Who’s in charge? I am not asking who the by-laws say is in charge. I am not asking who moderates the business meetings or leads the deacon meetings. I am asking, who has the greatest influence in the church? Who do church members go to when decisions need to be made? Who do church members listen to the most? Just because a pastor gets paid a full-time salary and preaches every week doesn’t make him the man in charge.<sup>31</sup>

Pastors of churches in decline have most often lost the reins of leadership to the power brokers in the pews and are content to maintain the status quo even if the status quo is tending a church on life support.

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<sup>30</sup> Brian Croft, *Biblical Church Revitalization: Solutions for Dying and Divided Churches* (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2016), chap. 3, sec. 1, Kindle.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 5, sec.1.

Croft also notes there are characteristics typical to a church in need of revitalization. One of those characteristics is homogeneity. He describes, “When you find a church needing revitalization, you will often find one generation, one race, or one kind of socio-economic class . . . Spiritual life and health come from the unity of diversity. The New Testament assumes diversity in the local church and the unifying of people different than each other displays the power of the gospel.”<sup>32</sup> Another characteristic is the lack of stability in the leadership role. In a church in need of revitalization, pastors typically move in and out rapidly. He writes, “The revolving door cycle of short term pastorates creates a breeding ground in which churches, too frequently burned, come to distrust the pastoral office, albeit unknowingly and allow others to usurp leadership roles.”<sup>33</sup> When no effective ordained leadership exists, it leaves the laity of the church to take the reins of the ministry in an effort to save their church. “Many of the churches that need revitalization have deacons or committee heads who assumed authority of the pastoral office in the absence of faithful, consistent men [or women]. Unqualified staff may temporarily be utilized to fill a gap, but those roles must be passed on to the next leader whose role it truly is to play.”<sup>34</sup> Because the congregation often feels abandoned or betrayed by ineffective leadership, even the most efficient pastor may have trouble wrestling control back from the lay leadership.

According to Croft, the barriers of exclusivity in the church must also be destroyed for revitalization to be effective. The needs of the community must be

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., chap. 8, sec. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., chap. 6, sec.1.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

assessed, and ministry developed to meet those needs. This is the primary reason churches in decline close, because they are unwilling to open their hearts to those who are different. Similarly, “A church that needs revitalization needs to take a hard look at this question, who are the kinds of people who are not welcome in our church? Dying, divided churches cannot find true, lasting spiritual life if they are not willing to receive and love all those who belong to Christ.”<sup>35</sup> When gentrification occurs as it has with St. James, it becomes even more important that the church be authentically welcoming to the new community residents.

Croft addresses the first half of Ezekiel 37, a vision of despair so far gone that life is no longer possible with the hope “God brings life by declaring His word, God breathes life by fulfilling His word, God breathes life by explaining His word . . . It is with this power that only comes from God that God can fulfill the promise of a new heart, a new spirit that dwells in His people, change them, cleanse them and bring them back to life. The same is true for dying churches.”<sup>36</sup> The responsibility of the church in creating new life is to depend on the transformative power of God, while at the same time repurposing the various elements of ministry to be culturally relevant and community focused.

Croft identifies two factors that can kill a church over time: the lack of spiritual life and infighting. Either of these, over time, can cause death to a church, but “When both are present, death is imminent.”<sup>37</sup> Other than these factors, life and health is

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., chap. 8, sec. end.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., chap. 1, sec. mid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., chap. 1, sec. end.

possible, even for the dying church. Twenty years ago, the membership of St. James had dwindled from 100 members to thirty-five active members. Ten years later, the church had only fifteen members remaining, three of whom represented the active leadership of the church. The other twelve members had retreated to the pews while many others chose to leave St. James for more stable spiritual ground, such as Pilgrim Baptist Church, a few doors down from St. James. The church was on life support and because it had turned inward, it was no longer trying to grow. Yet even with the changing demographics, gentrification, and educational and career limitations that forced African Americans out the area, the church can be rebuilt by reaching out and attracting those who move into the neighborhood. There is no shortage of people in the area. The pastor and people must be intentional in selling the idea to new residents that St. James is a church worth visiting.

***Reclaimed Church: How Churches Grow, Decline and Experience Revitalization* by Bill Henard**

The title of the book provides a clue to Bill Henard's philosophy on church revitalization. He sees the work of revitalization as reclaiming: recovering, retrieving, recouping something previously lost. For Henard, the death of a church only occurs when reclamation is no longer possible.

The life of a church has been defined by Bill Henard as having five stages: birth, growth, plateau, decline, and death. According to Henard, every church finds itself in one of these phases. More importantly, the church is representative of the people who populate it so in essence, the people are the church. He writes, "At this point, we have to look beyond the church as an organization or an entity. It is people, along with their attitudes, actions, and behaviors that demonstrate where the church finds itself on its Life

Stage. Is it growing, sitting on a plateau, or is it declining?”<sup>38</sup> The movement in life stage of a church is determined by its commitment to stay current with the needs of the community it serves rather than being concerned only with the needs of the current membership.

Any church can start out right and have the right goals, vision, and even strategy. The real test occurs when the church has to expand its leadership base and ministry concepts. It either decides to develop ministry to meet the needs and mission to reach the world, or it chooses to hunker down and take care of itself. When a church decides to become a survivor, it unfortunately sets the stage for death.<sup>39</sup>

This was the case at St. James a decade ago, when it turned inward and was struggling to survive.

Leadership, according to Henard, must walk the delicate line between how to best meet the needs of those already inside the church as opposed to the needs of those the church needs to invite in. He expounds on this topic by writing, “A key component to church revitalization and initiating change is getting the church onto the mission field to minister through the gospel and meeting needs. Leadership must learn to strike the balance between developing ministry that cares for the church and getting the church onto the mission field.”<sup>40</sup> As the church continues to move into growth, it must develop ministry and mission to strengthen the church internally and align the church externally.

The statistics on church decline are staggering. Evangelism in this century is more difficult than it has ever been. People are not necessarily opposed to God or to the gospel

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<sup>38</sup> Bill Henard, *Reclaimed Church: How Churches Grow, Decline, and Experience Revitalization* (Nashville: Fortress Press, 2018), chap. 7, sec. 1.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 3, end.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 3, sec. 1.

of Jesus Christ. They are, however, opposed to the institution of the church which has resulted in the growing population of the unchurched. Henard states, “The U.S. population continues to show signs of becoming less religious, with one out of every five Americans failing to indicate a religious identity in 2008 . . . The ‘Nones’ (no stated religious preference, atheist, or agnostic) continue to grow, though at a much slower pace than in the 1990s, from 8.2 percent in 1990, to 14.1 percent in 2001, to 15.0 percent in 2008”<sup>41</sup> To counter this trend, the work of revitalization must be employed:

“Revitalization is grounded in the Word of God; its application is rooted in the principles that are drawn from Scripture.”<sup>42</sup> Relying on and basing the revitalization work solidly in Scripture is the only way, according to Henard, one can find success in this endeavor.

Too often, pastors attempt to use models proven successful for other churches, but Henard cautions against this because “One reason churches struggle in revitalization is that they approach the task through a ‘cookie-cutter’ process; but churches, like people, are not all the same.”<sup>43</sup> Even as part of a connectional, denominational body, context is the key to a successful revitalization strategy. A ministry that is successful in a Zion church in one city may fail in another Zion church for the reasons Henard describes.

Henard agrees with the other authors thus far with regard to godly, effective pastoral leadership being a non-negotiable if revitalization is to be successful. He goes a step further, however, by offering wisdom regarding leadership development. Henard declares, “The fact is, if someone is not a faithful church member, that person will not be

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., chap. 7, mid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., Introduction, end.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., Introduction, mid.

a faithful pastor or leader. If a man is not fully committed while serving as a layman, he probably will not be faithful once he moves into leadership. In other words, if he does not like attending and serving faithfully as a volunteer, he will not like attending and serving faithfully in an official capacity.”<sup>44</sup> With regard to ordained leadership, Henard states:

In order to love the church and have a healthy church, we need healthy leaders. And if we do not have standards for what it means to serve, whether as pastoral staff or other positions of leadership in the church, we are not helping them. We are actually doing someone a disservice by moving them into leadership if they are not ready. Paul makes that point in 5:22–25. To be healthy, we need to choose our leaders carefully and structure our churches so that good leaders can be selected.<sup>45</sup>

There is no substitute for healthy, effective, godly pastoral leadership. In agreement with other experts, Henard reiterates:

Growing churches have pastors with longer tenures; therefore, fewer of those churches have open pulpits. More than half of existing churches are declining. Very few, only 9 percent are actually plateaued. Thus, most pastors, probably young pastors first entering the ministry, graduating from seminary, or taking their first lead pastor role are going to take on the responsibility of a revitalization pastor. This is an especially difficult task without having previous church leadership experience.<sup>46</sup>

In the absence of healthy, godly, mature, and determined leadership, revitalization efforts are doomed to failure.

Churches reach the life stage of decline when the original mission, vision and strategy no longer match the ministry context. Henard further insists, “Every church needs to learn to embrace the changes necessary to get it back on and keep it on a growth

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., chap. 4, mid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., chapter 6, sec. 1.

plane . . . A critical time to make that decision is when the church is at its plateau. If the church does not embrace change, it will begin to slide down the slope toward death.”<sup>47</sup> As revitalization is attempted to turn a church around, there will be buy-in from the current membership at different stages of the process. Henard denotes these stages: The Visionary Adopters, The Early Adopters, The Intermediate Adopters, The Late Adopters, and the Never Adopters.<sup>48</sup> By the terms used, one can imagine a new vision for a church where revitalization will take hold, without getting total buy-in from a dying congregation, so the work necessary will be slow, labor intensive and necessary, lest the church succumb to death. “It is tragic that most churches do just the opposite to what they are intended to do. When they start to plateau, rather than to ramp up reproduction, they turn inward and concentrate on their own growth. Churches choose birth control and the exponential advance of the Kingdom ceases.”<sup>49</sup> Plateaus are a safe space in nature but not so, in ministry.

### ***Reclaiming Glory: Revitalizing Dying Churches by Mark Clifton***

Mark Clifton’s experience in revitalization is as a church planter/re-planter can be a bit broader in scope and practice than traditional revitalization work as it may also involve the closing of one church and the start-up of a new church in the same location, merging with another ministry, or sharing the space with another ministry. His insights, however, are no less valuable. Clifton likens the church to the human life cycle: “Study after study indicates 70 to 80 percent of evangelical churches in North America are either

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., chap. 5, end.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., chap. 16, sec. 1.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., chap. 5, mid.

plateaued or declining. Like other organisms, churches tend to grow fastest in the earliest stages, reproduce frequently during their maturing years and hopefully assist as wise, generous, and loving grandparents during their final years.”<sup>50</sup> So from this perspective, the natural life of a church includes the death phase. He explains, “It is tragic that so many churches do just the opposite of what they are eternally designed to do. When we start to plateau, rather than seeking a kingdom legacy, we often turn inward and frantically concentrate on our own growth.”<sup>51</sup> New life for dying churches comes, in his opinion, from either closing and reopening as a new church under new leadership or by diversifying the church by having multiple churches using the same facility. “Wornall Road [Church] doesn’t look much like the 1940s version. We do not do ministry the same way. We do not serve the community in the same manner. And we certainly do not have the same cast of leaders. But we are relevant and reaching our community once again. The power that enabled the first generation is again powering this generation.”<sup>52</sup> It is expected that St. James will not look or serve as they did during the height of the past ministry or revitalization will have failed. The present generation requires a different delivery system and services.

His thesis is churches die because they allow complacency to set in. This is evident where he concludes that “Whether it is Israel in the sixth century BC or twenty-first-century North America, spiritually dead institutions of faith die for one reason and

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<sup>50</sup> Mark Clifton, *ReClaiming Glory: Revitalizing Dying Churches* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2016), 1.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

one reason only: they stop loving what they once loved and stop doing what they once did.”<sup>53</sup> Losing zeal will ultimately lead to church death. In addition to the loss of zeal, Clifton believes having the correct perspective on the mission of the church is of utmost importance to remain relevant and avoid the eventuality of death.

Dying churches often mistakenly assume the community is there for them. They see the community as the resource from which they can grow, when in fact they need to understand that the truth is just the opposite. The community is not there for the church; the church is there for the community. We don't have block parties to get people from the community into our building; we have block parties to get the people in our building into the lives of the people in the community. The fact that the community doesn't respond is ultimately seen by the dying church as a problem with the community, rather than a problem with the church.<sup>54</sup>

This is a prime example of a church needing to be replanted. Replanting from within, however, can be much more difficult than a traditional new or restart plant.

Replanting from within means the declining congregation becomes a core group, of sorts, for a brand-new church. The replanting pastor has to do the work both of a pastor and a church planter. He [or she] will shepherd the longtime members of the church and warm their hearts to the gospel as he [or she] evangelizes and disciples a whole new group of people. At times he [or she] will feel as though he [or she] has two different congregations that he [or she] has to patiently move in the same direction, toward the same end.<sup>55</sup>

According to Clifton, in a replanting scenario, it is also important to assess whether there is still a community to serve, and this is difficult for long-standing churches to accept. He states, “In particular, your surrounding neighborhood is your primary mission field. If the church exists to serve the local community but you no longer have a local community,

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 46.

you may have no reason for a church.”<sup>56</sup> Changing demographics, however, should not mean that there is no longer a surrounding community to serve. It simply means the community has a different makeup that calls the church to broaden the definition of community.

Regarding spiritual formation, Clifton ascribes to discipleship making and worship as primary. “Piper cited Psalm 92:1 and Psalm 67:3-4 as he wrote ‘Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn’t. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man . . . It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever. Worship, therefore, is the fuel and goal of missions.’”<sup>57</sup> Churches with a pattern of making disciples is a church that will not have an issue with decline. Clifton reiterates, “Many churches have little understanding of real disciple-making. Discipleship isn’t a program; it doesn’t take place in a classroom. Discipleship is sharing life and seeking to reproduce ourselves in others . . . Churches in North America are dying from a lack of discipleship.”<sup>58</sup> When churches do not understand disciple-making, they are at risk of death.

In general agreement with the other authors reviewed herein, Clifton states, “When you replant a dying church, you have to do all of those hard things and many more. Yet once accomplished, it becomes a platform to display the glory of God. You give people a living picture of what the gospel looks like—what was once dead is alive

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 7.

again.”<sup>59</sup>

## Conclusion

Can the dying tree be brought back to fruitfulness? According to the authors reviewed in this section, the answer is a resounding yes. Bringing a dying church back to health and vibrancy, however, requires much of a pastor and congregation. For the tree to live, the church must have a solid, singular vision upon which ministry is built. It must be genuinely welcoming to all people. The church must know it exists for the community and must be focused on mission. The pastor must not only be educated but also relatable, transparent and honest. Sermons must be spiritual and practical, having transformational impact. Discipleship must be a primary goal of ministry and an emphasis on social justice and equity must necessarily be a part of the church vision because it models the ministry of Jesus Christ. A church must also be willing to modify, repurpose, or discard what no longer serves a valuable purpose and take the time and effort to create new processes and ministries to promote the growth desired.

Churches which continue to operate in survival mode, flounder in their purpose. They become exclusive rather than inclusive and will not survive because this type of church has turned inward and is only concerned about those already inside. Without an outward reach, without welcoming in those who may represent a different demographic than the current members, death is imminent.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 18.

When I was assigned to St James ten years ago, there was no doubt the church was in the death phase and had been for a very long time. It has taken the last ten years to move out of the death phase and into a church replant from within, as the church has envisioned what they want their impact to be in the coming years. The major contributing factor to moving out of the death phase was my reappointment for ten consecutive years. Having longevity in the church and in the community has allowed the community to trust St. James will be there for the long term. Longevity has allowed the families and members of the church to trust the work they have started will be able to continue. St James has been able to establish and reestablish relationships with churches we had past connections with as well as create new partnerships. God has spoken to the dying tree that was St. James, to say that with proper digging, fertilization, and care, St. James will again become fruit-bearing for the kingdom of God for generations to come.

## CHAPTER 3

### A THEOLOGY OF CHURCH GROWTH

This chapter explores the theological foundations of church growth with regard to origin, organization, and divine purpose in sharing the gospel with all nations. Although this project focuses on church revitalization, the divine intent for the Church was for it to be a thriving, unified body of believers, continually growing in number and spiritual influence. Efforts to revitalize become necessary when this is not the case because dysfunction in the church eventually causes growth to cease. Maintenance ministry becomes the order of the day and stagnation sets in. Without remediation, the church will struggle to keep the doors open as it continues to decline and will eventually fail, either closing altogether or merging with another church.

Throughout America today, regardless of denomination, the Christian church is struggling for spiritual and cultural relevance. Mainline churches are aging with empty pews, needing to be refilled. This was not the divine intent for the church. The Christological model for church growth as described in the gospel accounts as well as commanded by Jesus in the Great Commission is explored. The biblical themes of unity, diversity, disciple-making, and spiritual gifting which played a role in the growth of the

first church at Antioch is also examined herein. Finally, this chapter focuses on the various nuances of the AME Zion Church which may promote or hinder church growth.

### **The Great Commission**

Once Jesus completed the redemptive work he was sent to do, the body of Christ, His church, was established so the work would continue. At the end of the church age, when Jesus returns, the eschatological events will set all things in divine order. As he prepared to ascend to heaven and take his seat at the right hand of his Father, Jesus gave his disciples a final command. This command was the charge of the church age and was meant to be in force as the primary function and responsibility of the organization known as the church, until Jesus returns. The command Matthew records in the 28th chapter, verses 19-20 was: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” The command holds within it several directives: the call to evangelize “go therefore,” the call to disciple “and make disciples,” the call for diversity “of all nations,” the call to commitment “baptizing them,” the call to salvific faith “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” the call to equip “teaching them,” and the call to obedience “to observe everything I have commanded you.” This scripture is the foundation upon which the purpose of church is held together, for it also comes with the promise of divine oversight: “and remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” This command has spoken to every generation from the first century to the present. It reaffirms the biblical mandate to foster spiritual growth and maturity within the body of

Christ so believers can be an appropriate imitation of Christ in the world. It is through our witness, work, and worship that others will come to know Jesus Christ and be added to the body.

The disciples were told in Acts 1:4-8 to wait in Jerusalem so they could be endowed with the power they needed to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ:

On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days, you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit . . . But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Growth of the church, and therefore, the kingdom of God, can only be accomplished in and through the power and direction of God. The leading and guidance of the Holy Spirit is essential to the work of evangelism and spiritual reproduction of disciples.

Spiritual reproduction, allowing the nurturing of others to become disciples of Jesus Christ, is the goal of the church. As such, the body of Christ must necessarily have compassion for those Jesus focused on the lost, lonely, and the disenfranchised. Keri Day, in her book *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism*, writes,

Being a witness is a call to imitate Christ in the present age. Such imitation is not merely a deontological ethics. Christians are not called to live out some set of rules in order to claim some type of “Christ-likeness.” Rather, Christians imitate Christ’s likeness and character, being formed and shaped by Christ’s witness, to come into solidarity with the suffering of the outcasts, poor and lowly people, workers, laborers and more.<sup>1</sup>

These are the populations to which the church must reach out, attract, and draw into the community of faith. When faith sees God in those who exist on the margins of society, it

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<sup>1</sup> Keri Day, *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism: Womanist and Black Feminist Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan Publishing, 2016).

is a faith that causes those who have not yet experienced salvation to desire relationship with Jesus. Jesus proves as much when he tells the parable of the master in Luke 14:21-23. Those who were invited to the great supper made excuses and did not attend. The master then commanded his servant to “Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.” And when he saw his table still had room, the master said to the servant, “Go out into the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full.” The point Jesus was making is those on the margins of society, whose humanity is rarely acknowledged, are waiting to be invited into relationship with Him. Those who are in relationship with Jesus are called to go out, get them, and bring them in. This is what the church is called to do.

Effective evangelistic efforts occur outside the walls of the brick and mortar building and focus on relationship building rather than rules and regulations. Acts 10 recounts the conversion of Cornelius and his entire household. Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Regiment, was a devout man who feared God and wanted an intimate relationship with God. This chapter is an appropriate example of how God must sometimes take the blinders off the eyes of believers to see God does not differentiate between rich, poor, Jew, or Gentile. The Church must be reminded that all types of people represent potential followers of Christ. Believers are instructed in this story to not make preferential distinctions, but to offer Christ to everyone. Peter was commanded by God to go to Cornelius, ignoring religious traditions and boundaries, and follow the instruction of God to preach the Word of God, offer salvation, and baptize he and his household into the faith. Acts 10:34-36 reads,

Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all” . . . While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit has been poured out on the Gentiles.

The church was richer, better, and grew because diversity was allowed.

It has been said that the most segregated hour of the week is eleven o’clock on Sunday morning. Yet, in Acts 2:37-47, after Peter preached his Pentecostal sermon, the human barriers preventing diversity were destroyed:

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter replied, Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call . . . Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day . . . All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need . . . They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all people.

This passage is a picture of the early church living in harmony across linguistic, ethnic, and class barriers, unified by their belief in Jesus Christ. The unifying factor was sufficient to create a new sense of multi-ethnic, multicultural community to effectively spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch, the first formal Christian faith community.

Yet, while the early church was clearly diverse, churches in America are by and large homogeneous, which plays into the White church/ Black church narrative. Efreem Smith, in his book, *The Post-Black & Post-White Church: Becoming the Beloved Community in a Multi-Ethnic World*, writes, “The issue today is that we have lost sight of

the fact that the first Christian churches in scripture were multi-ethnic and missional. Race has blurred our vision so that when we read scriptures, we read it with black or white eyes. And because the white eyes are culturally dominant, we see a White church in scripture instead of a multi-ethnic church.”<sup>2</sup> Other ethnic groups have followed suit and there now exists tribal church membership, with people coming to Christ alongside people who are like them, without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers. This may be comfortable, but it is antithetical to sustainable church growth. Ephesians 2:14-19 makes it clear there is one body of Christ, equitable and without schism:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to shame their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household.

If evangelistic efforts cross ethnic, generational, and socio-economic barriers, the remaining directives of the Great Commission: baptizing and teaching and can be carried out with ease because effective evangelism leads to salvation. The church must, therefore, emphasize and practice diversity in all its forms: ethnically, socio-economically, and politically. It must be a space where people from all walks of life feel welcome and valued. When the church extends itself into the community, spreading the

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<sup>2</sup> Efre Smith, *The Post-Black & Post-White Church: Becoming the Beloved Community in a Multi-Ethnic World*. (San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishing, 2012), 21.

love of Christ through practical acts of kindness, compassion, and friendship, people are drawn to love and therefore, to Christ and to a place of spiritual unity and belonging.

For a church to possess true spiritual life, there must be unification in the body of Christ. Ephesians 4:1-6 addresses the importance of walking in unity:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in you all.

The Word of God declares all believers to be one. Each believer is endowed with value from God and are to respect and value one another. In Romans 12:3-8, the Apostle Paul urges this divine unity within the diversity of the church of God:

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

This scripture is a reminder there is room for everyone in the kingdom building enterprise of God. There should be no one who cannot use their God-given gift in the work of ministry. There should be no one rejected because their gift, appearance, or personality is not a good fit. God has put out a clarion call for all who desire to be part of the family of God to let them know they are welcome, regardless of ethnicity, nation of origin, socio-economic status, sexual preference, or any other boundary serving to make them feel like foreigners and aliens. Foreigners and aliens do not exist in the kingdom of God. They are

constructs of human design, intended to create division and schism, neither of which are part of the divine design for the community of faith called the church.

### **The Christology of Church Growth**

The final three and a half years of Jesus' earthly life was committed to sharing the good news of the kingdom of God. Training his disciples to carry on the work of discipleship building through his message of repentance and salvation was his primary goal. From the moment Jesus chose twelve men to mentor, his message was consistent: "Follow me." This invitation to follow Jesus was not without requirement, however. In Luke 9:23-24, Jesus makes clear the demands of following Him: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it." Jesus is clear discipleship is not free. Taking up one's cross is a sacrificial action pledging allegiance to the work of the kingdom of God, above one's own pursuits. The cost of being a disciple of Jesus Christ is daily self-denial, and meeting the requirement is what enables a person to view the spreading of the gospel as their primary objective. Luke 14:33 states the cost of discipleship even more succinctly: "In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be by disciples." It is clear from these scriptural references Jesus was on a laser-focused, time sensitive mission. He chose only those willing to leave life as they had previously known it and follow him into uncharted, unfamiliar territory. These men had no assurance of a favorable outcome yet forsook all to follow the one who would bring redemption to all humanity. The cost to them and to all who choose to follow Jesus is complete surrender.

Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God throughout the gospel accounts and highlights the growth and expansion of the kingdom of God. In Mark 4:30-32, Jesus likens the kingdom of God to a mustard tree: “Again he said, ‘What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is among the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet, when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.’” Though the church of Jesus Christ began as a fledgling movement of a few hundred men and twelve leaders, it has become a way of life, worldwide, for millions of people. A day will come when the greatness and power of the church will be acknowledged by all.

Growth in the church of God is described many times in the New Testament. In addition to the Acts 2 account where 3,000 souls were added to the church as a result of the fiery sermon Peter delivered on the day of Pentecost, Acts 5:14-15 further states additional men and women believed in Jesus Christ: “Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter’s shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by.” This amazing growth occurred because the disciples followed the instructions of Jesus in Mark 16:15-18:

Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs shall accompany those who believe: in my name, they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands, and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.

The disciples obeyed the commandment of Jesus and Jesus honored their obedience. The church was in one accord, with a single mission, a single message, and a single method. Christ came to redeem humanity from the curse of sin and death. Those who believed in Jesus were to become imitators of Him and continue the work He began, until His coming again. John 14:12 reads, “Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.” Church growth and kingdom building power to change the world was the goal of the church. Once Jesus ascended to his Father his work on earth was accomplished.

### **The Early Church at Antioch**

As has been noted, the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch. The New Testament paints a picture of the infant church growing and being nourished by two apostolic commitments: devotion to the ministry of the Word and prayer. Acts 6:1-4 describes the importance the Apostles placed on these commitments. The passage reads,

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So, the twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word.”

The apostles ensured the needs of everyone within the community of faith were met and unity was the order of the day. Acts 4:32-33 recounts that “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection

of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.” There was a great sense of community within this diverse church and it allowed the church to focus on its primary purpose—to reach the world for Christ.

When the sense of community breaks down due to jealousy and infighting, problems arise. In the church of Corinth, challenges arose which created division within the church, caused by what Paul terms worldliness. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:10-13,

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, “I follow Paul” another, “I follow Apollos”; another “I follow Cephas”; still another, “I follow Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?

When the church has jealousy and quarreling within it, it will not be effective in its growth efforts. As this scripture makes clear, there must be unity of thought, word, and action with the entire body of a local faith community, moving in the same direction, for the advancement of the kingdom of God. Recognizing believers are privileged participants in the kingdom building enterprise should allow them to see all have gifts to contribute, but ultimately it is God and God alone who converts the soul and receives the glory.

Paul describes the divine design for the local church as socioeconomically diverse, multi-generational, multi-ethnic, and multicultural. These believers, with differing gifts, live out the gospel message through their thoughts, words, and actions and this original design is just as relevant for churches today. These essential commitments in the early church are also the foundation by which effective church revitalization is

accomplished in modern times. Living out the gospel created an environment promoting extraordinary growth of unity, boldness, and diversity in the early church.

Trusting God to the extent they walked in the authority of Jesus Christ and took his promise to heart, created tremendous growth for the early church. There are many examples of the apostles operating in the authority of the Holy Spirit, declaring the power of God and expecting the miracles of God. New disciples were added to the church as a result. Acts 3:1-10 is an example of the work the church is called to do, as it operates in like manner:

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of Prayer - at three in the afternoon. Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!" So, the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

When the people of God take this level of authority over the works of Satan, in the name of Jesus Christ, they can fully expect signs, wonders, and miracles to follow. What else follows, is the amazement of onlookers who see those boldly daring to believe the word of God. In addition, the Bible records that, after Peter preached to the onlookers, he offered repentance and the forgiveness of sins. This kind of ministry activity grows the church of God into a mighty, victorious army.

These early Christians took seriously the mandate of spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. They ministered in the authority of the name of Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. As they preached, allowing signs, wonders, and miracles to follow them, people believed in Jesus, received salvation, and the church continued to grow and expand its reach.

### **Church Growth and Zion Methodism**

The preamble of the constitution for the AME Zion Church reads as though it was penned by Paul looking forward in time to what the church would become. It has all the elements Paul deemed necessary for the local church to be successful.

We, the members of The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in order to advance the Church of Jesus Christ, safeguard the glorious heritage bequeathed to us by our forefathers, preserve our traditions as a people called ‘Zion Methodist’, maintain Christian fellowship and discipline, edify believers, convert the world, transform society, and perfect our unity and structure, do hereby establish and set forth this Constitution.<sup>3</sup>

The intent of the forefathers of the AME Zion denomination was to follow the teachings of the father of Methodism, John Wesley, and to adopt the ecclesiastical and episcopal structures of the Methodist Episcopal Church, from which they broke away. Their mission, however, was to follow the pattern of the early church, in polity and practice, ensuring all who wished to worship in the tradition of Zion Methodism felt welcome to do so.

Taking with them the doctrines, discipline, and polity of The Methodist Church, they proceeded in the establishment of Zion Methodism. They believed that God had called them out of their bondage and had chosen them to be His people and a channel of His redeeming love for all people. We believe and understand today

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<sup>3</sup> The General Conference, AME Zion Church. *The Doctrines and Discipline of The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church* (Charlotte: AME Zion Publishing House, 2016), 1.

that, in the Divine economy, Zion Methodism is to make disciples of all persons throughout the earth, to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. We are to continue this mission until Christ, God's Son, shall come again.<sup>4</sup>

The constitution of the denomination deals with general and organizational matters of the church such as rules of membership, councils, conferences, and boards. The structure and function of the various conferences of the church, from the episcopal level to the local church as well as the judiciary, are also covered in the constitution. There are also twenty-five articles of religion which address doctrinal issues which form the foundation of the Zion Methodist belief system. The Constitution restricts these articles from being revoked, altered, or changed. These articles are scripturally based and form the foundation of our belief system. The Discipline speaks of how to bring other societies under the Zion banner, how to receive clergy from other denominations, and the process of ordination for those who feel the call to preach. What the Discipline does not address is the issue of revitalization. The church was in a major growth phase for the first one hundred years, the time period the constitution and general rules of the church were established, and the forefathers did not anticipate a time in the life of the church when churches would be in danger of closing. A plan to counteract future church decline never entered their minds. Even more interesting is the Bible does not address church decline either. It speaks only of church growth because the church of God, by divine design, would experience continuous growth. If humanity had continued to follow the precepts laid down by the early church with regard to how believers lived together in the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 10.

community of faith, the church of God would not be failing today. The same holds true for the AME Zion denomination General Rules, which state in part:

It is expected of all who wish to continue in the societies, that they should continue to evidence their desire for salvation, by doing good, by being in every kind merciful after their power; doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all people. To their bodies, of the ability which God gives; by giving food to the hungry, by clothing the naked; by visiting or helping them that are sick or in prison. To their souls, by instructing, reproving, or exhorting all whom they have interaction with; trampling under foot that enthusiastic doctrine that “we are not to do good unless our hearts be free to it”. By doing good, especially to believers that are of the household of faith or groaning to be so . . . by running the race with patience set before them, denying themselves and taking up their cross daily.

Had the church not strayed from the tenets laid down in the Book of Discipline, it would have remained a force to be reckoned with. Zion churches would be full and flourishing with the singular mission of reaching the lost with the gospel and creating transformative impact on the world. This was the divine purpose of the Black Church in America.

Michael Battle, in his book *The Black Church in America*, relates, “The Black Church has always recognized itself as having a message with a certain character and substance. Some have characterized this message as redemption, others have named it as deliverance, and yet others see the essential message of the Black Church as a love ethic.”<sup>5</sup> The problem of church decline therefore, is one of human making.

An additional factor affecting the growth and health of AME Zion churches is itinerant ministry. The itinerant system of appointing pastors to churches has been operational in American Methodism from the inception of the Methodist Episcopal

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Battle, *The Black Church in America: African American Christian Spirituality*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 69.

Church in America. It is the basis on which Methodist preachers receive their pastoral assignments. “The itinerancy was adopted in America in the late 1760s. Bishop Francis Asbury of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America initiated the itinerancy through the American colonies. Circuits could have a total distance of 800 miles in the earliest years.”<sup>6</sup> The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, believed itinerancy in pastoral leadership was what distinguished Methodism from other denominations, as preachers were not allowed remain at one charge for a long period of time, becoming comfortable and setting down roots. Wesley believed preachers needed to travel as much as possible to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The AME Zion Church maintained the concept of itinerant ministry when it became an independent denomination and wrote restrictive rules concerning the method pastoral assignment. It is worth noting that “In paragraph twenty, article eight, number two of the Constitution of the AME Zion Church, it states, ‘It shall not change nor alter any rule of our government so as to do away with the Episcopacy, nor destroy the plan of our itinerancy.’”<sup>7</sup> Bishops supervising an Episcopal Area and the Annual Conferences contained therein, make annual assignments for ordained ministers to serve in pastoral leadership at the local church level. These decisions are generally made in collaboration with the district Presiding Elders for each Annual Conference, to determine the best pastoral fit to encourage growth in each local church. If done thoughtfully, the skill set of

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<sup>6</sup> Nolan B. Harmon, *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1974), 1242-1243.

<sup>7</sup> The General Conference, AME Zion Church. *The Doctrines and Discipline of The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church*, 4.

a pastor is matched with the needs of the local church. Yet, even in the best-case scenario, the challenges of itinerant ministry are many.

When a pastor and people meld, build relationships, and form community it is painful for everyone when the pastor is moved and assigned to a new congregation.

Darwin Little explains, “The itinerant form of leadership can hurt a church only in that as the church starts to grow and the members begin to trust their pastor, their pastor can suddenly be moved to a new pastorate

. . . churches grow to love their pastors and pastors grow to love their churches. It is a very special relationship.”<sup>8</sup> Itinerant ministry disrupts not only the pastor but their family. The family has lives established in the city and in the church just like the pastor. Spouses are often working in jobs they enjoy, and the children have made friends in school. The community has grown fond of the family and the pastor has become known and respected. While the pastor has made the vow to go wherever he or she is sent as an itinerant minister, it is very difficult for the entire family to pack up and move to a new city and church, leaving all those established relationships behind while walking into the unknown yet again. Divorce and separation can result due to the inability or unwillingness to uproot the lives and relationships every few years. Moves cannot happen unless the pastor agrees, which is a quandary because Methodist ministers knowingly enter itinerancy and rejecting an appointment may well mean not receiving an alternate, more suitable appointment.

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<sup>8</sup> Darwin Little, “The Fear of Congregational Abandonment Caused by Itinerant Ministry: Historical Foundations.” *The AME Zion Quarterly Review* 133, (April 2019): 6-14.

Itinerancy also has negative consequences when it is used for self-promotion. As was the case at St. James, there was a series of pastors who saw the appointment to St. James, a vibrant healthy church in its earlier years, as a steppingstone. Ministers needed to pastor at St. James to qualify for the top churches in the district: First AME Zion Church in San Francisco and Greater Cooper AME Zion Church in Oakland, California. In addition, the mission, focus, and programming of a local church can be discarded, redirected, or modified with each pastoral change, leaving the congregation in perpetual fluctuation, starting over whenever a new pastor is appointed. Pastors, therefore, used St. James for self-promotion, leaving the congregation hurt, damaged, and unwilling to trust the next pastor.

Itinerancy does have its place. In the case when there is a mismatch between the skills set of the pastor and the personality and needs of the congregation, itinerancy is helpful because it allows the pastor to be moved to a church that can better accommodate the skills they possess. The other instance where itinerancy plays a valuable role is when a church plateaus and moves into maintenance ministry. If the pastor is no longer working to actively grow the church numerically and ministry is no longer relevant, it may be time to release the pastor and the congregation from mediocre ministry and replace them with a pastor who has zeal for ministry, enthusiasm for growth, and love for people to refuel the congregation.

### **Conclusion**

Every church needing revitalization, at some point in their existence, lost sight of the biblical model for church growth. There was a failure to operate in the spiritual

authority necessary for increase and a failure to remain focused on purpose and mission. Growing a church through discipleship became unimportant, when in fact discipleship is the necessary thread running through every successful ministry. As believers take seriously the mandate to be ambassadors for Christ, spiritual boldness develops to take proper authority over the work of the enemy of the soul. Believers have been given permission by Jesus Christ to use the authority of the name above all names in spiritual warfare. Using the name of Jesus causes all demonic forces to lose their power and become useless against believers because every name must bow to the name of Jesus.

The word of God must be central in the lives, speech, and behavior of believers so the world can see the light of Jesus shining through them. Anyabwile declares, “The word of God must become as central to the life and activity of the church as a power plant is to the life and activity of our cities and homes. The Word must course through every aspect of faith and practice, giving energy and life to everything it touches.”<sup>9</sup> The word of God, not techniques or theatrics, is also a necessary element for revitalization. Only the word of God carries with it the power to overcome whatever issues have caused the church to go into decline. David declared the word of God to be a lamp and a light to guide the believer along the road of life. The church must come to understand, regardless of differences, all believers have been saved by the blood of Jesus Christ. In the power of Christ’s gospel is a unity to save, deliver, and set the captives free.

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<sup>9</sup> Thabiti Anyabwile, *Reviving the Black Church: A Call to Reclaim a Sacred Institution* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2015), 29.

There are only three viable options when the moment of decision comes as to what to do with a church that appears dead: to close the doors and allow the church to succumb to death, to ignore the death and continue on life support, or to believe God can speak to the dead situation and bring it back to life. Yet, the more pastors engaged in the work of revitalization trust the Word of God, the more powerful their efforts will be. What appears to be dying can, with the right strategy, be brought back to full life and vibrancy.

The question of race relations must necessarily be discussed as it was the basis for the formation of the AME Zion denomination. Daniel White Hodge, in *Homeland Insecurity: A Hip-Hop Missiology for the Post-Civil Rights Context* asserts, “Racial relations in the United States have been a muddled and turbulent road since the creation of the country. White culture has been the dominant culture and racial group in the United States and has created intricate systems and institutions to reinforce its supremacy, including deity, religion and faith.”<sup>10</sup> The AME Zion Church in particular, was birthed to lead the charge of social activism and equal rights which directly opposed the agenda of the dominant culture. This church has never accepted second class citizenship in a nation dedicated to a false narrative proclaiming all men are created equal. It fought fervently, from the inception of the church through the Civil Rights era, to ensure equal rights would become a reality for all people in America. Van Jones writes, “To face attack dogs, to face fire hoses, to face police batons, these heroes and

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel White Hodge. *Homeland Insecurity: A Hip-Hop Missiology for the Post-Civil Rights Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 114.

sheroes came marching boldly out of church houses. And they were singing church songs. They set an example of courage and sacrifice which will endure for the ages. And before they did it, they prayed on wooden pews, in the name of a Nazarene carpenter named Jesus Christ.”<sup>11</sup> The tension of the antebellum and post bellum South as well as the tension of race relations in every succeeding era: Jim Crow, Civil Rights, Black Lives Matter, along with the horrific mass murder of the Charleston 9 in South Carolina, the Charlottesville riots, and the countless men and women who have died at the hands of rogue law enforcement officers have cemented need for the Black Church to exist and to be more exclusive than inclusive when it came to welcoming white parishioners into a sacred Black space. John U. Ogbu states, “Black Americans became bicultural and bi-dialectical during slavery because they lived and worked in two different worlds which expected them to think, act and react in a particular way, depending on where they found themselves . . . As survival was the name of the game for Blacks, they talked and behaved the way Whites wanted.”<sup>12</sup> This way of being in the lived experience of people from the African diaspora contributed to the exclusivity of the AME Zion Church and to the Black Church in general. Race is so entrenched in the fabric of our society and in our thinking, it has made having a color-blind world lens, very difficult indeed. Edward Gilbreath, in his book, *Birmingham Revolution: Martin Luther King Jr’s Epic Challenge to the Church*, explains that “It is almost impossible to imagine not seeing the world through a racialized lens. This is especially true for the United States, a nation, emerged

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<sup>11</sup> Van Jones, *Beyond the Messy Truth: How We Came Apart, How We Come Together* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2017), 30.

<sup>12</sup> John U. Ogbu, “Collective Identity and the Burden of ‘Acting White’ in Black History, Community and Education,” *The Urban Review* 36, no.1 (March 2004): 9.

with a bang from this bold idea ‘all men are created equal’ but was thrown into a bloody civil war less than a century later over the question of whether some men should be treated unequally because of their skin color.”<sup>13</sup> With all the baggage America holds, it is necessary for St. James Church to find a way to maintain its identity as a historically freedom-fighting Black Church and at the same time, to resolve past hurts and damage both internally and externally. This is the only way to repurpose itself, so it truly welcomes all people and engages in the work of social justice and equity. This is of utmost importance to generations X (born between 1965-1979), Y (born between 1980-1994), and Z (born between 1995-2015) of all skin hues, cultures, and ethnicities.

The road to full revitalization for the St. James Church in San Mateo, California will be long, hard, and full of challenges along the way. Also, despite the sordid history of treatment of Black people in America, all individuals are inextricably tied together by the original sin of racism. John J, Ansboro explains, “There is no separate black path to power and fulfillment that does not intersect white paths, and there is no separate path to power and fulfillment, short of social disaster, that does not share that power with black aspirations for freedom and human dignity. We are bound together in a single garment of destiny.”<sup>14</sup> The Word of God was designed to be the singular authority on how humanity should interact with each other. Being that the case, humanity would be further evolved than where it is now. However, society has created laws, rules, boundaries, and

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<sup>13</sup> Edward. Gilbreath, *Birmingham Revolution: Martin Luther King Jr’s Epic Challenge to the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2013), 12.

<sup>14</sup> John J, Ansboro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Nonviolent Strategies and Tactics for Social Change*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 217.

exclusions which served to further alienate people from the institution of the Church. The Black Church is no exception, nor is the local church. It will take time, care, purposeful leadership, and trusting membership for St. James AME Zion Church to regain the spiritual strength and cultural relevance needed to foster growth for future generations.

PART THREE  
MINISTRY PRACTICE

## CHAPTER 4

### MINISTRY PLAN

Preparation to change a system from failing to successful is a long and tedious process in any industry. The revitalization of a church, however, has some additional challenges because the church is not only an organization, but is also an organism. It is alive, with people moving in and out, positions being created and eliminated, and volunteers serving at will. Most members in a church needing revitalization are generational members, having belonged for forty or more years. Rarely are there new members in a dying church: the membership represents the remnant of a former healthy, growing church. These members grieve as they watch the life of their beloved church ebb away. Potential new members see the church as too small and the congregation as too aged to be a viable option for membership consideration. An additional challenge emerges when meager membership of a declining church is not interested in new members because it will mean change is necessary for new life to occur.

Many issues occur to bring a once thriving church to this state of decline. Relationships have been damaged. Families have been splintered. Drug and alcohol addiction have ravaged communities. Economic disparities have caused flight to other parts of the state and country. The church has lost sight of its mission to the community

and even its divine purpose: to bring the lost to Christ, and to be a safe, sacred, soul-renewing space from the troubles people face in their daily lives. Yet these people represent the local body of Christ. Each person attends church having differing needs based on their age and previous church experience, and they rightfully look to the leadership, their pastor, to tend to their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs with care and compassion. What is typically lacking in a declining church is the discipleship component of ministry, hence the potential for growth is stifled by the lack of evangelistic zeal. Clifton asserts, “Success bearing fruit in the life of a church means having a pattern of making disciples who make disciples that results in the community being noticeably better. Pretty simple. In reality, dying churches do not primarily have an attendance problem, a giving problem, or a baptism problem. They have a discipleship problem.”<sup>1</sup> Inattention to this area of ministry over time creates a spiritual vacuum, with no new members joining and no growth occurring for those who are members.

The latest research reports less than 25 percent of Americans attend church on average, three Sundays in two months.<sup>2</sup> These statistics are supported in the historically AME Zion Church as well as across American Christendom. Regardless of the number of members listed on a church directory, people no longer attend Sunday worship the majority of Sundays in a year, which is particularly striking because personal faith, personal holiness, and the love of the church have ranked high historically in priority for people from the African diaspora. Michael Battle writes, “The Black Church has always

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory: Revitalizing Dying Churches*, (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2016), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

recognized itself as having a message with a certain character and substance. Some have characterized this message as redemption, others have named it as deliverance, and yet others see the essential message of the Black Church as a love ethic.”<sup>3</sup> Times have changed, and this is no longer the case. Similarly, Daniel White Hodge explains, “The recipe of the once-familiar meal of the church service has changed, and the taste is sour for many. In the wake of these developments, a generation of hypercritical and informed young people has risen, and those who cling to denominationalism and fundamental values are hanging on for dear life.”<sup>4</sup> So while the beginnings of the AME Zion Church boast the distinguished history of being the freedom church, it now struggles to remain relevant. It was among the first to send missionaries to oppressed people in the South once slavery ended; among the foremost advocates of emancipation in the dark days of slavery; and foremost in sheltering and providing for fugitives on their way to a land of freedom. Yet, the AME Zion Church has lost membership. The exception is in Africa, India, and Haiti where the flag of Zion Methodism continues to be planted and churches are growing and thriving.

To keep the pews from emptying Sunday after Sunday, the AME Zion Churches have joined the world of social media on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and live-streaming worship services. White Hodge continues, “Our new information society has helped to shape a society that does not need church services, sermons, or in many

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Battle, *The Black Church in America: African American Christian Spirituality* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 69.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel White Hodge, *Homeland Insecurity: A Hip-Hop Missiology for the Post-Civil Rights Context*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 178.

regards, salvation. All those things have been rated, commented on, and relegated to 140-character posts. North American Christians are facing a multifaceted conglomerate of change.”<sup>5</sup> Churches have renovated their sanctuaries, so they look less like a sanctuary and more like an entertainment venue. This moves the church dangerously close to mimicking societal standards rather than being the conscience of society the church was intended to be. As Dr. King so eloquently stated, “The church must be reminded it is not the master of the servant or state but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.”<sup>6</sup> The prophetic zeal that made Zion Methodism a formidable force for change must be recaptured if it is to avoid losing moral and spiritual authority.

The root of the decline in the AME Zion Church in general and at St. James AME Zion Church in particular, is brokenness. From the time we reached the shores of America in chains, the breaking of Black people was the primary agenda of the White power structure who brought them to America. Families were ripped apart on the slave block, separated to create isolation and abandonment. Public execution was used as intimidation to keep slaves in conformity. Preferential treatment of fairer-skinned Blacks was used to divide loyalty within the slave force. These and other forms of creating brokenness have been used throughout history and has contributed to the present-day reality at St. James. “Being close to suffering, death, executions, and cruel punishments

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>6</sup> Dominique DuBois Gilliard, *Rethinking Incarceration: Advocating for Justice that Restores* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2018), 9.

didn't just illuminate the brokenness in others, in a moment of anguish and heartbreak, it also exposed my own brokenness . . . We all share the condition of brokenness even if our brokenness is not equivalent.”<sup>7</sup> This brokenness infiltrated both individuals trying to survive the cruelty of the times as well as doing major damage to the communal ethos of those from the African diaspora. Examination of a few key points in the history of Black people in America validates prejudice as the source of our brokenness. The Black Church, including the AME Zion Church, rejected an entire segment of the Black population who, because the genre of music called the blues resonated with their lived experience, were condemned by the church as not sufficiently pious. They were cast out as aliens and foreigners, deemed by the church to be unacceptable in the kingdom of God. Dominique DuBois Gilliard argues, “Meritocracy places us in a position of judgment over and against others. It subtly fosters a fear of the other by differentiating us from them. It endows us with a sense of moral superiority in which we indict other and look down upon them. Over time, the church has welcomed a meritocratic ethic.”<sup>8</sup> Likewise, they rejected those who chose to live their lives openly as gay, lesbian, and queer. The church rejected those with mental health issues, making family members feel shame and guilt. The church rejected those who had been incarcerated. The repercussions of this prejudicial judgment by the church has resulted in negative consequences in each succeeding generation. In the name of God, the Black Church perpetrated racism against her own and increased the brokenness of our culture. DuBois Gilliard continues by

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<sup>7</sup> Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014), 288.

<sup>8</sup> DuBois Gilliard. *Rethinking Incarceration*, 170.

stating that “Christianity has consistently been used to legitimize exclusion.

Misappropriated faith has been used to create a buffer between us and them, be it between ‘moral citizens’ and ‘criminals’, the cognitively impaired and those without or the haves and the have nots.”<sup>9</sup> Brokenness within Black culture and the Black Church continued to deepen.

The Harlem Renaissance, on the other hand, opened its arms to everyone and became the gathering place for resistance and social justice. Well-known authors, editors, poets, and artists freely expressed their outrage at the violent cruelty of the practice of lynching throughout the South, as well as their disdain for the Black Church. What the church had been called to do, to stand up against oppression in all its forms, was accomplished by those whom the church rejected. An example is Billie Holiday, a jazz artist, who sang her signature song about strange fruit: “Southern trees bear strange fruit. Blood on the leaves and blood at the root. Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze. Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.”<sup>10</sup> These lyrics were a clear indictment of the lynching of Black bodies and while the Black church rejected Holiday, she shined a much-needed light on lynching in the American South.

When singer-songwriter James Brown became popular in the 1960s, he led the baby boomer generation in proclaiming that Black people could be proud of their heritage, history, and perseverance as a people. Brown caused youth to unashamedly ball up their collective fist and raise it to the sky, in defiance of injustice and mistreatment of Brown and Black people. Black baby boomers threw away the hair straightener and fell

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>10</sup> Abel Meerpol and Billie Holiday, *Strange Fruit* (New York: Commodore Records, 1937).

in love with their natural hair, wearing it with pride and learning self-love for the first time in America. White standards of beauty and social acceptability, having been instilled in the Black community as far back as slavery were rejected by this generation, but they suffered severe backlash in the Black Church. The church elders believed it was best to not draw attention to themselves. As a result, meritocracy found its way into the church and brokenness continued, in a vain effort to assimilate into the dominant culture for the sake of self-preservation. Those who conformed not only lost their zeal and hope for positive change but also for anything to better their lives. Filled with a fatalistic outlook, many turned to drugs and alcohol to cope with social and political injustice, unemployment, and hopelessness. Those who continued the fight ended up dead, in jail, or in an endless struggle to survive.

All the while, the church which nurtured many baby boomers in their spiritual formation—where they learned to be effective public speakers, and where they learned to trust in God to keep his promises, shook their collective head as their belief that rebellion always results in retribution was reinforced. The population of foreigners and aliens increased. The rejection and collective brokenness of the Black Church as baby boomers began to see the church as less relevant to their lives also increased. This pattern of exclusion is not, therefore, a postmodern wrinkle in the functioning of the Black church. These boundaries were not dissimilar in effect, to those which caused Black people to break away from the United Methodist Church. Not only were the undesirables of the arts, music, and literature during the renaissance period rejected, even relatives whose choice of secular music over sacred were deemed worldly, and therefore, unwelcome. Meritocracy can destroy relationships on every level: familial, racial, socio-economic,

gender, sexual preference, and world view. The same evil that birthed the Black Church then served to cause its brokenness, because the tendency toward exclusivity has not been dealt with in healthy, spiritually formative ways.

As the builder generation who viewed the church as the centerpiece of the community aged, and the baby boomer generation took a step back from the church, climbing corporate ladders and moving to the suburbs, Sunday as a day of worship and family time began to lose significance. Boomers worked hard to be valued as equals with their White counterparts which caused more value to be placed on making money and less value placed on relying on God as their source. Once God was subjugated to the list of priorities rather than being the top priority in life, parents did not model consistent church attendance, prayer, or Bible reading in the home as being necessary for life, health, and success.

The once tightly knit family structure, therefore, began to unravel and children were left to their own devices as latch key kids during the week. The family meal, once a non-negotiable in the African American family because of its community building force became a thing of the past. This disintegration of the family unit continued until, for the children of many baby boomers, family came to mean their friends and the streets rather than their biological relationships. Because the formal family structure was no longer adhered to and faith was no longer the centerpiece of the family unit, children were able to find their own way. Kilgore, Cockcroft, and Smith report, “The values inherent in African communalism, as opposed to American individualism, endured for a long time in the African American church. Gradually, however, acculturation along with upward

social and economic mobility began to influence African American Christians' views."<sup>11</sup> Relativism and spirituality without any basis in faith in God became popular among Black youth as it had with White youth. Also, because the children of the baby boomer generation were the first exposed to Hip Hop culture, it had a profound impact on their world view and their faith formation.

The effects of brokenness continued to deepen as, upon the birth of the hip hop movement, the Black Church failed, yet again, to embrace those whom God had sent as his foot soldiers. These young people were rejected as gangsters with vile tongues and godless souls. Yet, Tupac Shakur spoke to his generation, giving them hope that Jesus cared about what they were going through and would meet them right where they were. While churches sang the songs of Zion, Shakur assured his generation heaven did indeed have a ghetto, so they were going to be alright. Slick Rick was cautioning young people about the dangers associated with and consequences of living a fast life of crime. Naughty by Nature was telling poor and forgotten ghetto inner city kids to have hope because everything was going to be alright.

Though the Black Church had rejected previous generations, if it had embraced the hip hop generation, Black houses of worship would be filled to capacity today. Equality and justice would be further along. Yet, this was not the case. These young people and their messengers were also excluded from the house of God. With nowhere else to go, their sanctuary became the streets and hip hop became their gospel. Daniel White Hodge states, "Hip Hoppers embrace and love the Hip Hop Jesus. He is not

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<sup>11</sup> Jini Kilgore Cockcroft, and J. Alfred Smith, *From Classism to Community: A Challenge for the Church* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2016), 33.

concerned with church attendance numbers, tithes and offering totals, or which church has the biggest choir. The Hip Hop Jesus cares about the people and their quality of life.”<sup>12</sup> While the church saw Jesus as the rewarder of their suffering in a future life, the hip hop generation sees Jesus as one who understands their plight and is the liberator of the oppressed in this life.

In 2017, during the protests in Ferguson, Missouri following the murder of Michael Brown, his body laid in the street for four hours uncovered, as a lynching display. The protest organizers requested churches along the protest route open their doors, so those who needed a break from the tear gas and rubber bullets, or those who wanted to pray would be able to go in and rest. Yet, preachers who proclaim the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ every Sunday did not answer. Tara Thompson, one of the principal organizers of the nightly protests in Ferguson, personally witnessed churches along the protest route, all of which were Black churches, unwilling to open their doors. Though Black clergy came out during daytime marches, when it was time for nightly protests, they all went home. The only business with open doors to the protestors was a cafe and coffee shop owned by a member of the LGBTQ community. Those deemed foreigners and aliens, rather than the Church, came to the aid of young Black and Brown people fighting for justice. James H. Cone, in his book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* writes, “If racial healing is ever to come to our society, it will mean remembering and retelling our story of racial injustice and honoring the voices and the actions of those who stood against it.”<sup>13</sup> The chasm between the Church and the

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<sup>12</sup> White Hodge, *Homeland Insecurity*, 126.

<sup>13</sup> James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 164.

generations it was called to serve continued to widen. Over time, exclusivity relegated those who were fifty and under to the proverbial church balcony like their ancestors. As a result, these generations do not feel accepted or valued. Michael Battle explains,

The unwillingness of the Black Church to become a place where disparate communities and those who have not found organized religion embracing will eventually kill the Black Church if it does not again become the place where everyone feels welcome. It is the great power of the Black Church in America: it goes beyond itself and has practiced a communal spirituality which invites the possibility of disparate identities to find common ground.<sup>14</sup>

This caused the Black Church to become increasingly irrelevant with regard to issues needing its attention in the current political and social climate. What has happened to the Black Church universal also happened to the AME Zion denomination, trickling down to the vast majority of local AME Zion church bodies. St. James has been in decline for forty years because this brokenness has not been addressed, much less healed.

Economics also played a significant role in splintering families in the Black Church, and in St. James in particular. Enamored with the idea of affordable housing, many Black people moved from San Mateo to the suburbs outside the Bay Area. According to Census 2000 figures, five of nine Bay Area counties—Alameda, Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo and Santa Clara—have shown decreases in the African American population.<sup>15</sup> Between 1960 and 2000, the number of African Americans living in the suburbs grew by approximately nine million, representing a migration as large as the

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<sup>14</sup> Battle, *The Black Church in America*, 45.

<sup>15</sup> Bay Area Census, “Population by Race/Ethnicity and County, 1980-2010,” <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/historical/corace.htm>.

exodus of African Americans from the rural south in the mid-twentieth century.”<sup>16</sup> The cost of housing, designed from the outset, by the wealthy White populous of San Mateo who were determined to create a community they would control, has always been a financial stretch for people of color. As noted earlier, the north central sector of San Mateo was the designated redlined district for African Americans, Japanese, and Jewish residents and this practice had the full backing of the government. As Richard Rothstein notes in “The Color of Law,”

Until the last quarter of the twentieth century, racially explicit policies of federal, state, and local governments defined where whites and African Americans should live. The policy was so systematic and forceful that its effects endure to the present time. Without the purposeful imposition of our government regarding racial segregation, the other causes: private prejudice, white flight, real estate steering, bank redlining, income differences, and self-segregation—still would have existed but with far less opportunity for expression. Segregation by intentional government action is not de facto. Rather, it is what courts call de jure: segregation by law and public policy.<sup>17</sup>

The additional negative consequence of redlining communities was not apparent until President Richard Nixon declared the war on drugs in June 1971, the day after he had declared drug abuse public enemy number one. His action was in response to drugs being used to symbolize youthful rebellion against the government, political structure, and social climate of the 1960s and early 1970s. All scientific research to evaluate the efficacy and medical safety of illicit drugs such as opium and marijuana was halted and instead the war on drugs was initiated. This war was especially impactful on Black

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<sup>16</sup> Shawn Ginwright and Antwi Akom. “African American Out-Migration Trends: Initial Scan of National and Local Trends in Migration and Research on African Americans.” (San Francisco: San Francisco State University, College of Ethnic Studies, 2017), 1.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Rothstein, “The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America, <https://books.apple.com/us/book/color-law-forgotten-history-how-our-government-segregated/id1165834646>.

communities which were now termed ghettos. Rothstein defines “Ghetto [as] a word that accurately describes a neighborhood where government has not only concentrated a minority but established barriers to its exit.”<sup>18</sup> This new term was coined by the United States government to describe neighborhoods where people of color were concentrated, and by design, had a negative connotation attached to its meaning.

All across America as well as in the redlined district of San Mateo, drugs were in ample supply rather than being eliminated from neighborhoods, as promised by the administration. Heroin and crack cocaine were especially plentiful in San Mateo, and their use became epidemic among young people of color. A former top Nixon aide, John Ehrlichman admitted the Nixon Whitehouse had two enemies: the anti-war left and Black people. While they could not make it illegal to be either against the war or black, getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, then criminalizing both heavily, would adequately disrupt those communities. Leaders were arrested, homes were raided, and character assassination and vilification of Black people occurred on the nightly news. It did not matter if what was reported was true or not. The goal was to infuse fear into the hearts of people, to criminalize drug use, to incarcerate as many people as possible, and leave the rest hopelessly addicted, in gangs, or dead. The effect on the St. James congregation was devastating as the children of members became addicted to heroin in the 1970s and crack cocaine in the 1980s. Families were torn apart as their loved ones were incarcerated, strung out, or both. In addition, fear of their own family members and friends who became drug addicted caused the church to put its head

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 15.

in the sand rather than taking a proactive stance. Dominique DuBois Gilliard asserts, “When criminals are viewed as the social cancer infecting our communal health, safety and thriving, we cease to see and affirm their humanity. Rather than being fellow image bearers, we see criminal as hazardous elements contaminating our neighborhoods, and thus they must be purged by any means necessary.”<sup>19</sup> Rather than following the example of Jesus which calls believers out of their comfort zone and into the painful reality of those who exist on the margins of society, the church chose to turn its back on the most vulnerable among us: the homeless, the addicted, the unemployed, the incarcerated, and the disenfranchised.

Between 1980 and 1997, the drug related incarceration rate skyrocketed from 50,000 to over 400,000 and is now over 2,000,000.<sup>20</sup> The vast majority of these incarcerations with draconian sentences continue to be Black and Brown men with minor drug violations. The Black Church bought into the lie that the war on drugs was a sincere attempt of the government to rid Black communities of drugs and violence. Brokenness continued to exacerbate. The United States government was also complicit in the promotion of housing segregation through the establishment of discriminatory Federal Housing Administration (FHA) policy and through purchasing the bulk of private home construction during World War II. For the first sixteen years of this agency, FHA encouraged racially discriminatory covenants. The FHA promise was given to developers

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<sup>19</sup> DuBois Gilliard, *Rethinking Incarceration*, 147.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

who then went to banks and received low interest construction loans based on their agreement to promote segregation in housing.

After World War II, the practice of redlining continued in the form of decreased housing loans to veterans of color and restricting where they could purchase housing using their FHA benefit. This practice successfully created segregated neighborhoods which were often run down and in less desirable areas. The Supreme Court ruling of 1948 dictated racial covenants as unenforceable (*Shelley vs. Kramer*). However, the FHA and VA continued to promote racial restrictions in their loan practices until the 1960s. The last restrictive housing covenant in the county was voided in 2007, however, rents and property prices in San Mateo still reflect the practices which fed residential segregation. The most affordable apartment in San Mateo today is in the 1,500-dollar range and a luxury apartment or rental home can cost upwards of 7,000 dollars per month. The average rent in San Mateo is 3,229 dollars per month, behind only Boston, San Francisco, and Manhattan as the priciest cities in the country. The average rent nationally is 1,430.00 dollars per month.<sup>21</sup> Low and moderate income people as well as those who work in the public sector, such as teachers, police officers, medical personnel, and firefighters, are caught in the forgotten middle: those who do not make little enough to qualify for subsidized housing but also do not make enough to be able to afford market rate housing. San Mateo remains a city where only those with incomes in the six-figure range can afford to live.

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<sup>21</sup> CoStar Group, Inc., <http://www.apartments.com/san-mateo-ca/>.

The gentrification of the historically Black neighborhood in San Mateo, known as North Central, played a major role in the decline of the church. The community surrounding the church lost the majority of its Black population due to better housing opportunities in Foster City and East Palo Alto where new, accessible, and affordable housing was built. The Latinx community moved into North Central and the majority are limited English speaking or monolingual Spanish speaking families. This created a language and cultural barrier difficult for St. James to navigate. Reverend Rufus Cooper was able to create genuine ecumenicity during his two tenures at St. James in the 1940s and 1960s and was active and vocal in the fight for equality and civil rights. Since then, only one pastor, Reverend James Davis, attempted to remove racial and ethnic barriers by renting the church to a Latinx ministry to hold worship services on Sunday afternoon. What Reverend Davis was not able to do was to forge a successful partnership between the Spanish-speaking congregation and the English-speaking congregation, so what could have been two congregations under the same umbrella instead became just a rental agreement.

The final major contributor to brokenness leading to church decline is found in the malpractice of itinerant ministry. Croft writes, “The revolving door cycle of short term pastorates creates a breeding ground in which churches, too frequently burned, come to distrust the pastoral office, albeit unknowingly and allow others to usurp leadership roles.”<sup>22</sup> When a new pastor succeeds someone the congregation felt was unqualified, it is a daunting task to bring the congregation to a place of trust and confidence in them. Yet,

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<sup>22</sup> Brian Croft, *Biblical Church Revitalization: Solutions for Dying and Divided Churches* (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2016), chap. 6, sec. 1, Kindle.

the new pastor must spend the time and energy necessary to convince the congregation he or she is worthy of their trust.

Brokenness cannot heal itself. Believers are called to imitate the likeness of Christ to the extent they identify with their brothers and sisters from all walks of life. They are called to enter into solidarity with their suffering in whatever form it takes, because in reality, it is a shared brokenness. Yet brokenness is what causes believers to continue professing high morals they no longer believe in. They continue, to this day, to participate in the ritual of Sunday morning worship yet too often fail to live out the ritual in their daily lives. This shared brokenness stems from the wounds of history, appearing to be scars, yet upon closer examination, are actually scabs, easily re-opened and constantly subject to infection. When this painful reality is ignored, church pews empty over time.

Healing this collective brokenness and therefore shifting the church life cycle from decline to sustainable growth is a lengthy process. It requires a leader willing to stay the course, dedicating the time necessary to this arduous task. In a declining church, there are several factors that need to be addressed to set a new course towards growth and health. The established culture will need to change, the church power structure needs to most likely be righted, making the pastor the voice of authority. Operations need to be examined and modified. The worship liturgy must be evaluated to ensure it is reaching the hearts of the people. Music may need to be blended; rituals may need to be modified. The order of worship may need to be contemporized, and the ministry of the Word of God must be central to the sacredness of the worship experience. Croft further explains, “The biblical plan is this—a central focus on the ministry of the word and prayer, a

rigorous and passionate application of the gospel in everyday life, and a tenacious effort to love and shepherd every redeemed soul in that local church.”<sup>23</sup> Revitalization is an all-encompassing, time consuming labor of love for a pastor called to the work of bringing a church from the brink of death back to health.

### The Journey from Brokenness to Health

Preparation for the revitalization of St. James Church began with casting the vision to transform the ministry from its current state of decline into a new, vibrant church within the established building, where everyone is welcome and ministries are relevant. The vision was cast to the remnant of the former church because the few members who remained over the years wanted their church to be revived. Croft recommends to “Start on the inside with the sheep that remain. Otherwise what kind of church will the new arrivals that you go and get from the community find?”<sup>24</sup> These few, faithful members were not willing to give up on their church and watch it die. They believed with the right leadership, their church could somehow be revitalized so beginning the revitalization effort with those who remained created a welcome partnership between pastor and people, serving to influence others who had left the church to give St. James another try. This remnant also became ambassadors for the church, letting the community know there was a new pastor and St. James was on a new journey towards health.

The revitalization effort began with a six-week sermon series to begin the conversation about pursuing growth versus remaining with the status quo of ministry.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 616.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 720.

The series covered the logical consequences of growth, stagnation, ministry relevance, and the logical consequence of church death if intervention does not occur. The congregation quickly realized the status quo would lead to church death in less than a decade as the majority of the church is in their seventh decade of life or more. Further, Croft states, “For a church to move toward lasting health and life, the structure of the church needs to be evaluated to determine whether it is conducive to facilitating healthy growth.”<sup>25</sup> A vision and mission statement was developed to effect a re-launch of the ministry since the church had never had either and needed some guiding principles upon which to build the new church inside an established building. The new mission statement, now prominently evident on all written materials is “St. James: Christ-Centered, Culturally Relevant, Community-Focused.” The vision statement is “To become the church of the community, known for offering ministries and events that bless the community while furthering the work of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We bring people to Christ by taking Christ to people through benevolence, relationship evangelism, Spirit-filled worship, as well as through the operation of signs, wonders and miracles.” The congregation has embraced the mission and vision statements and uses them as the template upon which all ministry programming is designed.

The logo designed for the 100th church anniversary was adopted as the new logo for the church. It is being printed on all written materials and the church name has been shortened on all materials to St. James Church, rather than using the full name which proved to be lengthy and cumbersome. Quarterly devotional magazines are now being

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 404.

distributed to the membership for their spiritual growth and to be shared as a form of relationship evangelism. The pastor continues to preach on church growth, inclusivity, and diversity as the hearts of the current membership become increasingly receptive to change. Bible study in 2019 has focused on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, using the scriptural guide found in *52 Weeks with Jesus* by James Merritt.<sup>26</sup> Attendance at Bible study has increased substantially. Rather than a single teacher for the adult class, there are four adult teachers in rotation and the use of a variety of materials and weekly continental breakfast was added. Attendance at Sunday school has increased by 50 percent.

Reclaiming the lost generations who received their spiritual foundation at St. James but for a myriad of reasons no longer attend church at all, is on the minds and hearts of the membership. This area, however, has proven to be especially sensitive because the target population is the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of the most senior members, who do not themselves understand the exodus of their families from the church. This facet of the revitalization process will be, by congregational consensus, the most difficult to achieve and will be left to the pastor in the listening tour as part of the research component of this work. In the meantime, upgrading the church plant to attract new members and learning to offer radical hospitality has become the primary focus for increasing Sunday morning participation.

The blueprint for revitalization was multi-faceted: to examine every area of ministry, making whatever changes were deemed necessary, to modify the operations function of the church and update the worship experience to make it more appealing to

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<sup>26</sup> James Merritt, *52 Weeks with Jesus*, (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2011).

visitors. This work included the physical plant, the administrative, business, and financial functions, community focus, and the worship experience. To expedite this otherwise time-consuming process, changes and updates were brought to the congregation for consensus as suggestions from the revitalization team were made. This allowed the congregation to see the positive effect of change as other areas were under review.

During this same time period, May 2019 to October 2019, the pastor, in collaboration with the ministry staff, made small yet effective changes to the worship experience, further preparing the congregation for the larger changes to come. Two offerings, collected at different times in the service, were combined, collecting tithes and offerings in trays and benevolent funds in baskets, at the same time. This also proved cumbersome, so the steward board decided all donations would be collected in baskets with tithes placed in envelopes. An electronic giving option was also added which is popular with the younger members of the congregation. The order of service was rearranged, to allow for a better flow and to make it feel more contemporary. Rather than the choir processing in every Sunday, this more formal form of service is limited to the first Sunday of each month. The other Sundays begin with a congregational praise and worship service, led by the music ministry. Preaching of the Word has been infused with the relevance of pop culture, social media, and current events in a way that assists the listener in applying the message to their daily lives and having takeaway points to further consider in the coming week.

The final goal of revitalization was to ensure ministries, activities, and events were developed and implemented in a multi-generational way, rather than by department, club, or board, which has been the denomination's typical model. There are four major

departments in The AME Zion Church: Christian Education, Evangelism, Women Home and Overseas Missionary Society and the Lay Council. In addition, there are smaller groups, including ushers, choir, food ministry, among others. The laity of the church can choose to participate in one or more of these departments which hold ministry events at the local and district levels. The historical challenge is these departments become territorial and cliquish, both of which can have a negative influence on the congregation. New members may not be invited to join or feel welcome to do so and if not carefully managed, the various departments can operate more like social clubs than ministry outlets. Several of the most senior members requested the church operate intergenerationally so everyone would feel equally included, a sentiment which grew over time and as the church membership dwindled. While a particular department may spearhead an effort, all members are invited to participate. This practice was instituted early in the revitalization process, and to date has been very successful, giving even regular attendees a place to become connected, belong, and give back in meaningful ministry service.

The goals of revitalization will not be reached without struggle. Hard work lies ahead to shape this ministry in a way that serves the whole community because treatment of Brown and Black people is still governed by the same White, colonialist oppression that met the first African Americans who arrived in America. The same White supremacist power structure is in full force today and has successfully morphed over time, taking on new forms of lynching, degradation, and dehumanization with each decade. San Mateo is still a city that is governed by a few wealthy families who want to maintain power. Therefore, the fight that began with the founders of the AME Zion Church to be treated

as equals continues today. As the freedom church, it is imperative that this church regain strength, put on armor, and continue the fight until racism, disenfranchisement, and inequity are issues of history rather than the current reality.

### **Conclusion**

Collective brokenness caused the decline of St. James. Creating a church determined to welcome and value all people is where healing begins. Healing continues as we shed the traditions that have not served the church well and adopt new traditions following the tenets of Jesus regarding inclusivity, love, and compassion.

All of humanity belongs to Christ: those who are in relationship with Him as well as those who have yet to enter into relationship. The lost are meant to be found through interaction with those who have already been found. This is a primary task of the church which applies to all people, whether heterosexual, LGBTQ, tattooed from head to toe, a gang member, a prostitute, a drug dealer, cis-gender, non-gender conforming, homeless, rich or poor, and regardless of skin hue or age. Traci C. West explains, “In Christian religious terms, learning about multiple cultural patterns needs to be valued not only because it can expand an understanding of what it means to be human. It also offers worshippers the spiritually enlightening opportunity to grow in their views about how the creative power of God and justice-seeking interacts with the social adaptation human beings create.”<sup>27</sup> People should be able to attend the church of their choice, best suiting their spiritual and emotional needs, regardless of any human or denominational boundaries. Churches claiming non-denominational status have become popular in the

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<sup>27</sup> Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 132.

post-church age because all are made to feel truly welcome and people have the freedom to be as visible or as anonymous as they wish and to contribute to ministry or simply be a spectator. In a small church, however, these are not viable options. Members get involved and normally have responsibility for ministry in several areas. It is, therefore, even more important for those who wish to join themselves to churches like St. James, a small family church, to feel like family rather than feeling like visitors, guests, foreigners, or aliens.

## CHAPTER 5

### IMPLEMENTATION

The overarching goal of this revitalization project is to bring a dying church back to life by in essence, creating a new church within an established building. This new ministry will offer impactful ministry to the community, will be a stalwart defender of social justice, and will be known in San Mateo City Hall as well as in the county offices, as a church that is politically active for the common good. Growth in multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-generational membership will be a by-product of this new ministry. May St. James not be just a church among many in the community—but the church of the community. St. James will become, like the first AME Zion Church, a force to be reckoned with for the common good.

The team leading the revitalization effort was formed in April 2019, consisting of the board of trustees, board of stewards, the church secretary, the executive administrator, the ministry staff, and the pastor. The charge of the team was to create a new church within a historic structure. The initial goal, developed and agreed upon by the team, was to first address what was considered low-hanging fruit: modernization of the church plant and updating the business and financial processes by which the church functioned. The majority of the membership was on board from the outset, making the preparation for

change much less tedious. Members were eager to participate in the change they knew was necessary for the church to survive. Knowing their participation in the process would result in new growth and vibrancy in the church they loved, seemed all the motivation necessary to jumpstart their enthusiasm and the process. A couple of long-standing members were initially skeptical and uncomfortable with the swift pace of the process because the team created subcommittees so multiple areas could be addressed simultaneously. Other long-standing members, already on board, took responsibility for encouraging them to not to block the process but to wait and see before forming an opinion. As change progressed, those members bought into the mission and vision and have become advocates of the revitalization process as well. Healing and excitement began taking hold as the membership realized that revitalization could be a reality at St. James.

An initial walkthrough of the physical plant was performed. Many unused spaces and under-utilized spaces within the church were noted. The team then began a formal environmental scan by analyzing the physical property, first with safety concerns in mind. Electrical plugs installed low enough for a small child to reach had safety plugs added. Wires covered by pieces of carpeting were removed and re-installed properly. Light fixtures and switches were checked to ensure no electrical issues existed. The inspection also involved examining every space from the perspective of a potential new member, determining what changes were needed to keep the traditional look of the historic church, while also offering a contemporary feel. The scan also focused on ensuring the church was family friendly so young people and families would be attracted.

This led to several substantive changes suggested to the revitalization team by the membership. Members gave beyond their tithe to support these changes financially. This represented major growth for the church as they had no knowledge of tithing as a principle of stewardship before my tenure began. Carpet and lighting in the sanctuary were replaced. The ushers loft became a nursery, complete with baby changing tables and rocking chairs. The over forty-year-old flooring in the fellowship hall was replaced. Several spaces on the lower level of the church were also repurposed. A storage area was converted into a therapy room. The pantry area was condensed to create space for a children's ministry. The choir room behind the sanctuary was converted to a conference room. A single stall bathroom was added on the sanctuary level, and the lower level bathrooms were completely remodeled so all three bathrooms are now in compliance with American Disabilities Act regulations. New exterior church doors were purchased and installed. These changes, though extensive, did not in debt the church because St. James has been practicing the biblical principle of tithing for a decade. The finances of the church, as well as the management of those funds, has been and continues to be, very strong.

The administrative, business, and financial processes were also evaluated to determine where modification was needed. Members who had not previously been serving began sharing their expertise. The board of trustees was limited to a maximum of seven members, with the pastor as ex-officio as the seventh member and tie-breaking vote. The steward board was increased to eight to limit members serving on the counting team twice a month rather than weekly, as had been the case when the board had only four members. The pastor is ex-officio and ninth member of this board as well but is not

part of the counting team. All clubs and boards were evaluated to assess whether they fit into an area of kingdom building: worship, stewardship, fellowship, or discipleship. If so, the club or board was left in place. If not, it was dissolved or reshaped to fit the criteria.

The treasurer updated the financial system from manual recordkeeping to QuickBooks software and consolidated all church accounts into two: the general fund and the building fund account. All funding goes through one of these two accounts with the approval of the trustee board. The pastor remains in charge of the benevolent fund, with the poor steward keeping track of how much the fund contains and working with the pastor to obtain funds from the account when the need arises. The steward board added an online giving option for those who prefer electronic giving. The worship service is now broadcast via teleconference as well as through social media. A new minister of music was hired who blends music genres so all age groups can be ministered to. A new drummer and guitarist round out the music team and the choir, who, though small in number, sing with excellence.

The final major change was to St. James' Christian Education department. The Bible study that had not been well attended over the years has tripled in attendance due to the delivery system instituted. The one-hour session is now held via teleconference so seniors who do not drive at night or can no longer get out can dial in, as can younger members who have worked all day and just want to get home. Both ends of the spectrum and all those in between can call in and listen, ask questions, and grow from the comfort of their own home. Sunday school was also revamped by adding three additional teachers for the adult class. This class tripled in size due to the amount of discussion, interaction, and the different teaching styles which allows material to be taught in a variety of ways.

There is no youth ministry, but the pastor is prepared to teach Sunday school should younger people attend. Children are released for children's church before the second music ministry and sermon. They generally return at the end of service.

Leadership development occurred concurrently with the changes the revitalization team was engaged in. Because changes were occurring on a weekly basis, the pastor stepped back and allowed those in leadership positions to develop their skill sets in a way that had not occurred prior to the start of the revitalization process.

In order to love the church and have a healthy church, we need healthy leaders. And if we do not have standards for what it means to serve, whether as pastoral staff or other positions of leadership in the church, we are not helping them. We are actually doing someone a disservice by moving them into leadership if they are not ready . . . To be healthy, we need to choose our leaders carefully and structure our churches so that good leaders can be selected.<sup>1</sup>

Allowing leaders to lead is essential to a successful revitalization process. Both new and seasoned members with expertise in various areas stepped forward to volunteer in creating a new church. A new level of spiritual growth along with membership growth has taken hold at St. James Church as the congregation experiences the newness of ministry in worship, fellowship, stewardship, and discipleship.

The revitalization team then determined a goal for membership needed to be established. Since the church celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2019, the goal of 100 active members by the end of the 2019-2020 annual conference year, though ambitious, seemed a reasonable goal if effective evangelistic efforts were engaged. Events such as friends and family day and contests for bringing the most visitors to church in a year were

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Henard. *Reclaimed Church: How Churches Grow, Decline, and Experience Revitalization* (Nashville: Fortress Press, 2018), chap. 4, sec. 4.

attempted in the past with very limited success. To be more aggressive and hopefully, more effective, the board of trustees approved hiring a professional marketing company to send welcome postcards each month to people moving into the area within a five-mile radius of the church. The board also approved subscription to a high quality, quarterly devotional publication as a tool for evangelism. This has become quite popular with members and friends of St. James. 250 devotionals are distributed each quarter to friends, family, and co-workers, locally and nationally. The devotionals are part of the greater evangelistic thrust of the church: to increase the kingdom of God rather than focusing only on increasing the membership of St. James.

The congregation understands the church must actively invite people of all nations to become part of the St. James family to ensure future sustainability, while remaining true to our African American heritage, tradition, and worship style. “Lasting spiritual life comes through a pursuit of God’s design for His church ... When men and women embrace their unique roles with other men and women; when black, white, rich, poor ... unite under the reality of having been saved by the blood of Christ in the power of the gospel, unity is found and life comes with it.”<sup>2</sup> Using the relational evangelism approach in conjunction with professional marketing has resulted in an increase of fifteen new members thus far in 2019, bringing the membership to sixty-six. With four months left in this conference year, the goal is to increase membership by thirty-four additional new members.

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<sup>2</sup> Brian Croft. *Biblical Church Revitalization: Solutions for Dying and Divided Churches* (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2016), chap. 8, sec. 2, Kindle.

A surprising outcome of the revitalization effort is the close connection between fellowship and discipleship. The departments and ministries of the church were re-envisioned by the pastor to reflect a more contemporary, non-denominational feel. The social ministry, responsible for development and implementation of social events for the membership, has been quite successful in planning events allowing the general public to see the church together as a family outside the church walls.

If you want your church to become a congregation that makes disciples that make disciples, you have to get your people into discipling relationships with one another. That has to be a foremost priority of your church. You must encourage engagement in discipleship in your preaching, teaching, and your conversations. You must model discipling others and being a disciple as well. You must create environments where relationships happen that form the basis for discipleship.<sup>3</sup>

What was thought to be fellowship events have turned into relational evangelism opportunities for our members to talk to their friends, not only about our events but about their church and their faith. Additionally, the senior members are getting to know the newer members and the intergenerational interaction is a real bonus.

The physical, operational, and programmatic changes made thus far at St. James have resulted in the church having more appeal to potential seekers, as evidenced by the number who have visited and became regular attendees and then have made the commitment to membership. Even with all the changes and growth thus far, it was important to conduct research to analyze data which contributed to the initial decline of membership to create a pathway to revitalization of St. James.

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Clifton. *Reclaiming Glory: Revitalizing Dying Churches* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2016), 74.

## Research and Analysis

To test the thesis that church decline is reversible with appropriate intervention, it was necessary to collect research that would support or invalidate the thesis. A questionnaire has been designed for this purpose. Initially, the research sample was going to include four denominational leaders (Bishops), four leading pastors, and eight adult additional churched, unchurched, or formerly churched participants. This sampling proved to be too small and too limited to include those who may have not had any spiritual formation as children but are now active in church, as well as those who had exposure to spiritual formation as children and have chosen to no longer affiliate with any specific religious tradition (Nones). The sample size was therefore increased to thirty adult participants: four denominational leaders, four leading pastors, and twenty-two additional, non-clergy participants. The non-clergy invitation for participation was sent to those with no religious affiliation (nones), previously churched but no longer attending any church, marginal church affiliation, and current church affiliation. The sample was people of the African diaspora since this project focuses on the revitalization of a Black Church, but there was no regard for any other personal, sociological, or political factors. The design of the questionnaire made it anonymous, ensuring respondents could not be identified, allowing them to speak their truth freely.

Of the thirty invitations, twenty-three people responded in the affirmative—a 77 percent response rate. 26 percent were in the eighteen to thirty age range; 22 percent were in the thirty-one to fifty age range, and 52 percent were in the over fifty age range. Because the researcher believed there may be some differences in church commitment based on geography, the choice of West Coast, East Coast, Mid America, and South was

a question on the questionnaire. 78 percent of respondents were from the West Coast, and less than one percent from each of the other geographical areas, however the responses showed no differences based on geography.

## Results

Analyzing the sample holistically, all but one respondent had some form of faith formation in church during their childhood. Only two respondents were not taken to church by anyone related to them. The vast majority, 91 percent, attended with parents. One did not go to church as a child and one went alone or with friends. One respondent did not have parents who attended church.

83 percent believed tradition and personal faith were the primary factors determining church attendance. With the exception of the one respondent who had no childhood faith formation and the one respondent that never went to church with a parent, all others, 87 percent, believed they were taken to church for purposes of personal faith formation. Three of the respondents believe their parents attended church due to ministerial/pastoral responsibilities. One respondent commented, “[Mom] had a firm belief in the teachings of the church, and she wanted to be sure my soul was saved by attending the church and receiving those teachings.” Another stated, “For me [church was] to learn life lessons and ways of escape to help in times of need.”

When asked about the regularity of church attendance as children however, interesting results appear. 59 percent reported weekly attendance, 27 percent reported semi-regular attendance, and only 14 percent reported more than once a week attendance. The eighteen to thirty age group reported weekly attendance, while the thirty-one to fifty

group reported irregular attendance. This indicates the majority of faith formation occurred on Sunday in the traditional church setting.

Respondents reported children's choir and Sunday school as the main forms of faith formation, with children's choir being the primary activity. Only 23 percent reported nontraditional formative experiences such as church basketball teams, dance, or youth retreats. Only one respondent reported attending a youth group.

When asked what their favorite part of church was as a child, the eighteen to thirty group reported friends were their favorite part of church. "Being with other children. Learning about Bible characters. Singing in the choir," was one response. A second response was "Children church and activities that were for children/youth specifically." Any activity involving them being with peers was the consensus of the entire sample. The thirty-one to fifty group reported music as the favorite part.

Just as telling was the response to the least favorite part of church as a child. The common thread was being with adults, long services, frequency of church, arbitrary rules, and hellfire and brimstone prayers and sermons. The consensus of respondents was that adult worship service was not understandable nor enjoyable. One participant stated, "Having to sit and be quiet. I also had bad dreams because of hearing about the devil." Another said, "The restrictions imposed by adults I did not even believe were true as a child such as dancing being a sin, Smurfs being a sin, everything being a sin." A third participant stated, "The sermons. They were pompous and unrelatable."

100 percent of respondents attend church as adults. 91 percent reported weekly attendance and the remainder reporting occasional church attendance. A participant replied "Yes I currently [attend church]. I'm still trying to follow the goals of my mother

(for me as a child) by attending church.” The consensus of the eighteen to thirty group was church attendance is important to continue the spiritual journey their parents started in them. The thirty-one to fifty group see church as a good way to begin the week and to continue tradition. The reasons for attending church as adults are quite similar to what the respondents liked most about church as children: a sense of belonging, community service, faith formation, and spiritual growth—in that order. A second respondent noted, “Yes I do attend church. I have my own relationship with God outside of my parents, so I attend a church within my city.” Three respondents reported attending church with much less regularity than they did as children.

When asked about the preference for diversity, there was an equal number of respondents preferring diversity, preferring homogeneity, and those who have no preference. A third of the respondents preferred ethnic diversity, but with the Black worship experience and Black leadership also being preferred. One respondent answered, “Ethnic diversity is important but not at the cost of the loss of a strong justice voice and empowered black leadership.” The eighteen to thirty group, while raised in the Black Church, do not care about the level of diversity or prefer diversity. The thirty-one to fifty group was much more splintered: one had no preference; one preferred homogeneity: “I prefer homogeneity because it is the one place I can just be on Sunday mornings and due to the crimes against the church I no longer feel comfortable with random non-Black people coming to the church,” and one prefers diverse leadership if the church is diverse, as they have a trust issue with White church leaders due to the history of Black people in America: “I prefer the leadership to be of ethnic diversity. Because Christianity and white people each have an oppressive history, I do not feel trusting of white church leaders.”

The majority of respondents believe church is welcoming to some degree, however the comments noted were telling. The first was “As a visitor, you can feel the spirit of the place even if you are not spiritual.” The second was, “Church is welcoming, when the guests look like they can easily assimilate.” A third comment was, “Whether a church is welcoming depends on the atmosphere set by the leadership.” For this question, those in the eighteen to thirty group responded with one exception, stated the church is not welcoming: “They make sincere efforts but tend to create spaces more comfortable for regular church attenders, not visitors.” Another person said, “It depends on the church.” Interestingly, the thirty-one to fifty group concurred with the younger group, with only two responding the church was welcoming and four responding the church is not welcoming due to cliques. The response to this question points to a major potential reason most local churches are missing the eighteen to fifty population in the pews on Sunday morning. While the over-fifty respondents reported feeling welcomed, the church has failed to extend the same level of comfort to younger people.

Though reasons for church attendance ranked faith formation as third in importance from the total sample, for the eighteen to thirty group, music ranked first and sermons second. The thirty-one to fifty group ranked sermons first and music second. The definition of church also appears to have narrowed from any church related activity, regardless of the day of the week it occurred as children, to Sunday worship specifically, as adults.

There were four major categories of complaint for the least favorite part of church as an adult: politics, polity, pettiness, and protocol. More specifically, rituals, meetings, cliques, messiness, and judgment were noted. Other least favorite parts of church

included “Witnessing the diminishing size in the number in weekly attendance is disturbing” and “As a young adult having preachers use your current and common struggles as a condemning sermon is annoying.”

One of the most surprising responses was 70 percent of the respondents reported they did not feel judged. This is surprising because it is the explanation for so many who do not attend church. The eighteen to thirty group reported that three did not feel judged; one felt judged when at events outside the local church, “At my home church no but at the conference level, yes. I feel like I have to cover tattoos, wear the right clothes, the right length, not too tight, not too high of heels, etc. The older women seem to have nothing better to do than to gossip and try to get dirt on my family.” One felt judged because of age, “As previously mentioned, being a young adult in church feels like having a target on your back. Everyone loves to speak on what they think is wrong with our generation when they have never experienced the things we can go through, or they have, and choose to judge with no empathy.” Of note in the thirty-one to fifty group is one reported self-judgment and one, a pastor, felt under-estimated because of his age.

Things attracting the over-fifty respondents about church were relationship, fellowship, message/sermon, and friendly, non-judgmental environment. For those eighteen to fifty, the consensus was gaining knowledge and having a sense of community ranked the highest in attracting them to church, but these groups reported not feeling a sense of community in a significant way. What repelled the entire sampling was the same: judgment, pettiness, hypocrisy, cliques, and negativity. One participant identified “Mean-spirited members, pettiness, lethargic worship, and vacuous preaching” as what they found repelling.

The qualities their favorite pastor possesses included servant leadership, knowledge, compassion, morality, authenticity, honesty, and understanding. “My favorite pastor is accepting and understanding. She is always available for advice and never judges. She loves everyone and cares about you understanding the word and making it personalized toward you.” Another respondent stated, “I like that the pastor is real, she does not come off as holier than thou. I like that the pastor has a life outside of the church and is relatable. I enjoy the quality of the sermons and how service and the church is run and managed.” The eighteen to fifty groups added formal education and relatability to the list. The least favorite pastoral characteristics followed the sentiment of this quote by one of the participants: “Hypocrisy, lying, infidelity, flashiness, dishonesty, dumb to the Word, loose lips, no compassion, narcissism.” Another participant said, “Being all about the money and being afraid to be a leader because they want to be liked by the congregation.” The eighteen to fifty groups added being uneducated to the list.

All but two respondents agreed basic Christian doctrine is part of their belief system. Those who did not agree were raised in the church, received faith formation as children, and currently attend church regularly as adults. One responded stated basic Christian doctrine does not seem reasonable and the other believes some parts are true while other parts are fabricated by man.

The final question dealt with the respondents designing a church, and as expected, there was a wide range of responses. There were, however, some common threads, the major one being their church design would be for a small to medium-sized church, like a family. Additional commonality included people from all walks of life, the church as a community gathering place open seven days a week offering services to the community, a

spiritually mature leadership team, dynamic praise and worship, shorter rather than longer services, a tithing church, lots of fellowship opportunities, no dress code, friendly and biblically sound, with practical sermons, and the church would be seen as a beacon of light in the community.

### Analysis

The lack of consistent faith formation in children is a cause for church decline. The data revealed while most of the respondents had some level of faith formation as children, in the form of Sunday school and choir, only one respondent attended a youth program. Sunday school generally begins at the primary level, age three, and continues through the junior level, age twelve. There is then a gap between age twelve and adulthood, based on the data, when little if any formalized faith formation occurred in the church. This is significant as these are also the years when people are most impressionable and developmental formation is at its peak. From twelve to eighteen, children involved in youth programming can continue the basic training received earlier in life which can lead to their own commitment to Jesus Christ. This gap exposes a major void in the spiritual formation process, with the effect of weakening former spiritual growth causing disconnects between both the individual and the church as well as the individual and their personal faith. Faith formation is important at all ages: childhood, youth, college ministry, and adulthood. It is the common thread in every response to the question about the favorite part of church as a child: peer relationships.

A continuum of faith formation greatly decreases the next cause of decline: lack of community building. The data shows community building is a major component of a healthy, growing church. This sense of community is built in if the faith formation is

lifelong. People grow up together in the church, moving from Sunday school to youth ministry, and in college the church can establish ways to keep the students connected to one another and to their church home. This strategy increases the probability that people will stay connected to their faith in Jesus Christ and to their church as adults.

Ensuring a welcoming church environment provides a favorable first impression of a church and speaks volumes as to the spirit of the church. This is often the single element determining whether a visitor returns a second time. When people do not feel welcomed, they tend not to return. Once connected to a church, if they do not continue to feel a part of the church community, they do not remain connected. Providing a welcoming environment includes the pastor modeling community building with the congregation. The pastor must necessarily be a participant in the community building process. Many respondents listed similar characteristics when speaking to the preferred ethos of a pastor: “Compassion, integrity, honesty, and servant leadership,” “I like that the pastor is real, she does not come off as holier than thou. I like that the pastor has a life outside of the church and is relatable.” Even if a pastor leads a large congregation, the ability to make congregants feel the personal care of a small church leads to a greater sense of community. As summed up by one participant, “My favorite Pastor was heavily engaged with the congregation and the community, knew the names of every single member (1000+) and had an authentic anointing.”

The final issue the data suggests as contributing to church decline is the narrowing of the definition of church to Sunday activity only. When the sample responded to their favorite church activities in childhood, those activities spanned the week. However, when asked about the favorite parts of church as adults, the responses

were limited to Sunday worship. Unless congregants can participate in community building events outside the worship hour, it is difficult to cultivate the feeling of belonging to a faith community. For those in the over fifty group, church holds the meaning of relationship with Christ alone, while for those fifty and under, the context of what the church means, and the associated relationships are much broader and relational. “From a transcendental perspective, the post-soul millennial takes into account cultural, familial, ethnic, and racial heritages and begins to seek God without stripping those elements from their personhood. Class, race, gender, sexual orientation, sexuality, ethnicity, family, and context are all held in tension. A simple identity in Christ is not necessarily the capstone of faith. More often than not, what is valued is identity in a Black or multiethnic Christ.”<sup>4</sup> Being identified with Christ also means being identified with one another, without regard to societal labels.

Because of the responses to the questions of feeling welcome and feeling judged, more research is necessary to ascertain how these terms are defined by the participants. The responses indicate feeling welcomed and feeling judged is interpreted differently if one is inside as opposed to being outside the church. This may have colored the responses. Several of the reasons the respondents are repelled from church attendance are also listed under the least attractive pastoral traits which supports the theory that qualified pastoral leadership is of utmost importance to a healthy church environment.

Lastly, it should be noted the Nones did not choose to participate in the research, as evidenced by all participants currently attending church. It would have been

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel White Hodge, *Homeland Insecurity: A Hip-Hop Missiology for the Post-Civil Rights Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 160.

informative to have their input as a part of the data presented; however, it speaks to their lack of desire for engagement with the traditional community of faith. Unfortunately, it appears the Nones do not feel comfortable explaining their reasoning for being Nones or do not have a full grasp on all of the conditions and circumstances that led them to this expression of faith in a way they can articulate.

### Conclusion

The modernization of the St. James Church and business processes has enabled the church to operate in a more efficient manner. The modifications in the worship service served to enhance the spirit of worship while trimming the service time down significantly, without losing the essence of the worship experience. The changes also succeeded in creating a contemporary look for the church as well as a twenty-first century operation, such as online giving and dial-in Bible study which appeal to those fifty and under. While there appears to be little relationship between the data and the physical, structural, and operational changes made by the revitalization team, the changes were necessary to bring the church to a properly maintained state. The church being in good physical, family-friendly condition enabled the pastor and membership to address the four major causes of church decline.

The issues negatively affecting growth and leading the church decline are correctable. The social ministry held three successful outings for church members to get to know one another better outside of church. The membership shared how enjoyable the events were with family, friends, and co-workers which is a good first step to relationship evangelism, potentially leading to discipleship, and ultimately membership. The

membership has adopted what they term radical hospitality, greeting all who attend with smiles and hugs and making sure all visitors are personally greeted after service and seated next to a member, so they do not have to sit alone. There is anecdotal feedback via Yelp and Facebook reviews where visitors have found the hospitality at St. James to be warm and inviting.

Yet, with all that has been accomplished, there is much work ahead. The Christian Education department must expand its programming. The adult Sunday morning Bible study class is functioning well, but faith formation must be continuous, from the time one can learn in children's church through adulthood. The existing gaps are the areas of youth ministry and college ministry. As the research data verifies, effective youth and college ministries help ensure that community connectedness remains intact between early faith formation and adult commitment to faith in God and regular church attendance.

The other area where additional work is needed is in the expansion of the definition of church activity beyond Sunday. Bible study is offered via teleconference so people can call in from wherever they are. This has caused the Wednesday night Bible study participation to double in size, with new people calling in each week. Because it is advertised on the church website, it has become a comfortable entry point for seekers. Other ministries need to be developed to further expand church events, both during the week and outside the church walls.

The ultimate goal of the revitalization of St. James Church is to see it become the centerpiece of the community, known as an affirming church, inclusive and genuinely loving and diverse. "The body of Christ is to be a unified multi-generational and multi-ethnic church that demonstrates a deep sacrificial love for each other. Find that kind of

diversity and love in one local church, and you will find marks of health.”<sup>5</sup> The church being built at the historical address on Monte Diablo Avenue in San Mateo will possess these traits when the revitalization process is completed.

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<sup>5</sup> Croft, *Biblical Church Revitalization*, chap. 2, sec. 2, Kindle.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

St. James AME Zion Church was a church in decline. Its population was seniors with a couple of exceptions. The church plant was well maintained but quite dated. Three people provided leadership for the laity and pastors came and went without making a substantial impact on the future life and health of the church. St. James was seen as a ministerial steppingstone to a larger church. Few, if any, new members joined the church while death continued to thin the ranks of the membership. Without intervention, this church was destined for closure within a decade.

The purpose of this project was to develop a strategy to revitalize this church by reversing the decline and creating an environment conducive to new growth. Extensive work had to be done in both the church plant and the congregation for all the necessary forthcoming changes if new life was to be possible. The Bishop assigned a pastor with a heart for long term leadership to the church. The pastor and congregation discussed the available options: to remain in the status quo and allow maintenance ministry to slowly kill the church or to put in the time and energy necessary to create a new St. James, positioned for growth and health for generations to come. Because the congregation chose the latter, the church is on a journey to a new, fruitful future.

St. James Church has accomplished a tremendous amount over the last eight months. The look and feel of the church have been transformed from an old church in desperate need of a facelift to a wonderful blending of historical and contemporary design. In addition to the changes already discussed, new energy-efficient windows in both the sanctuary and fellowship hall are scheduled to be installed and new interior sanctuary doors will also be purchased and installed, with armed intruder security

measures in mind, completing the church plant improvements. The congregation has been transformed as well, from a few people who worshipped faithfully yet feared their church would be closed in a few years to a growing, vibrant congregation, excited for what the future holds for their church. New members are finding their place of gifting and getting involved in ministry.

Yet, major issues remain that must be resolved if St. James is to have sustainable ministry moving forward. The first is the question of how to recapture the lost generations. There are two generations from the families of our senior membership missing from the pews. The instability of itinerant ministry, poor leadership, inadequate ministry to the community, judgment, and lack of genuine connection to the church are all potential causes for the loss of these generations. The challenge is how to reclaim them so they will give God and his church another try. The initial strategy, because of whatever caused people to leave the church, is to teach the current senior members how to re-evangelize their family members by inviting family members to fellowship events so they can witness the newness of the church firsthand. The secondary strategy is for them to promote the church in a positive way as they communicate with their families, as these strategies may prove the most effective way of healing the past hurts and re-introducing them to the new St. James.

The second area needing additional work is establishing an educational pipeline of faith formation, from childhood to adulthood, resulting in intimate relationship with Jesus Christ and regular church attendance. The Christian Education department will spearhead development of the pipeline, filling existing gaps in the current programming. A new disciples guide for youth and young adults will be developed, serving as a

catechism for young people who join the ministry. The guide will teach basic rituals such as the Lord's Prayer, the Affirmation of Faith, the service for holy communion, and baptism. It is important young people not only understand the rituals exist but more importantly, the biblical and spiritual meaning of these rituals. In addition to education, the questionnaire results pointed to opportunities for fellowship as very important in creating the community necessary to keep individuals connected to the local church. The youth director will design and implement this portion of the ministry. Children attending the same church constitute a cohort, growing up and growing old together, so there must also be a college ministry, to keep the cohort active even though they may scatter for college or work opportunities. The delivery system for the college ministry will necessarily be one utilizing social media and online communication. The pastor will enlist the assistance of current college students in the development of this ministry, as they know how students prefer to stay connected to their church. The activities for the children, youth, and college ministries will need to have engagement both on and off the church grounds, on Sundays, and occasionally on other days of the week as well.

Community building is going well. The social ministry is doing a good job of creating events to get the members into social settings outside the church walls. The membership is growing closer as a family and sharing all the church is doing with friends and family. It is expected that continuing these efforts will provide adequate entry points for people to interact with the St. James membership in a relaxed environment and will also lead to participation in the greater ministry of the church.

Ensuring people feel welcome when they visit is always in the consciousness of the congregation and this area is operating well. The following current practices will

continue: a hearty welcome upon entry, a welcome packet which includes our quarterly devotional as a gift, a welcome by the pastor during service not requiring any response on their part, and being welcomed more personally by the congregation and pastor at the end of the service. Visitors are also sent a letter within twenty-four hours, thanking them for worshipping with us. This practice will continue as it is working well.

As a church who models the servant heart of Jesus, ensuring all ministries are designed to draw the community to the work the church is involved in, is also necessary. Many are looking for a church they can see in the community, making a positive impact, which becomes their initial connection to the ministry. Once relationships are developed through participation in community service, it is hopeful relationship with the ministry proper may also develop.

Refilling the pews of St. James is the overarching goal of the project. It will not happen overnight. In fact, it is expected to take three to five years of operating in this new model before the full manifestation of the revitalization effort is realized. What has been put in place thus far is a great start and has positioned the people of St. James to operate in ministry leadership with confidence. Brian Croft writes, “My goal as I went to pastor a church needing revitalization was to stay long enough to change the broken, dysfunctional patterns that had existed in the church for decades so as to establish healthier patterns that would not revert back once I left.”<sup>6</sup> It is with this mindset and determination, despite the itinerancy of Methodism, that this project was designed. Building a new church on a solid foundation, with capable lay leadership and sufficient

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

spiritual maturity among the ranks, should ensure healthy patterns, and prevent regression due to changes in pastoral leadership.

St. James will be the freedom church, not just in theory, but in actuality. Those who enter her doors will find a safe and sacred space, free from judgment. They will serve and worship God according to their gifting, in a loving and supportive spiritual family. There will be no foreigners in the kingdom at St. James—only family members, working side by side to fulfill the Great Commission.

It is the author's hope that this project will provide guidance to first time pastors in the AME Zion Church who, more often than not, receive appointments to churches in decline. Further, may the concepts learned through this project be of benefit to new pastors in other denominations within Christendom.

## APPENDIX A

### D. Min Final Project Research Questionnaire

All questions required answers. Except for the first two questions, all questions are open ended, requiring narrative response. The responses were completely anonymous by design so as not to color the analysis of the responses.

1. What is your age range? Options: 18-30; 31-50; 50+
2. Geographical Area. Options: East Coast, Mid America, West Coast, South
3. As a child, did you go to church?
4. If you went to church, who took you?
5. What factors do you believe led them to attend church?
6. Why do you think they chose to take you?
7. How regularly did you attend church as a child?
8. What activities were you involved in at church as a child?
9. What were your favorite parts of church as a child?
10. What were your least favorite parts of church as a child?
11. As an adult, do you attend church? Why or why not?
12. If you attend church, why do you attend and how often?
13. Do you prefer homogeneity or ethnic diversity in the church setting and why?
14. Do you feel church is sufficiently welcoming for visitors? Why or why not?
15. What is your favorite part of church as an adult?
16. What is your least favorite part of church as an adult?
17. Do you feel judged when you come to church? If so, in what ways?
18. What attracts you to the church? What repels you?
19. What qualities did/does your favorite pastor possess?
20. What qualities do you find least attractive in a pastor?
21. Is basic Christian doctrine (e.g. immaculate conception, virgin birth, resurrection) part of your belief system? Why or why not?
22. If you could design your own church, what would it look like?

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