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# The Disparities in the Treatment of African American Women in the Southern Black Baptist Church

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Although the backbone of the African American community, the Black Church still engages in discriminatory practices against women. The Black Church was born to help African Americans survive in a world that discriminated against them, and yet it discriminates against its own Black women. This study focuses on the disparities in the treatment of African American women and men in the Southern Black Baptist Church. Based on ethnographic interviews of women who actively hold leadership roles in prominent Southern Black Baptist Churches, I highlight the magnitude of the problem Black women face, and show that the continued discrimination is resulting in many women leaving the Black Church. The Black Church will continue to be the backbone of the African American community, but until the Black Church faces its own issues of gender discrimination, it will not advance.

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## Introduction

The Black Church has been a stronghold for the Black community. As the Black community's foundation, the Black Church has shaped every chapter of African American history. The Black Church has been a constant pillar for the African American community, providing refuge from the racist world we live in; a place for African Americans to come together, as a community, and praise God for bringing us out of the turmoil we face each day. The Black Church has been a saving grace in every aspect of the African American community. From the Underground Railroad to the Civil Rights Movement to now, the Black Church has been and always will be the foundation of the Black community. The Black Church was born at a pivotal time for the African American community to address the constant problems in White America caused by the discriminatory acts of racism. It was born to help African Americans survive in a world that hated them because of the history of slavery as marked by their skin color (Gates 2021, 19).

Although the Black Church has been constant in the African American community, the Black Church has internal issues of its own. Gender discrimination

has been a sustained problem in the Black Church. Unlike other denominations, where it is common for women to hold leadership positions, obtaining such roles in the Southern Black Baptist Church is not so common. In many Black churches, congregations are predominantly composed of women, and the pastors in these churches are typically all males. However, over time, Black women have begun to feel that they too are called to preach God's word and minister to the saved and unsaved. In the Black Church, women have been denied the right to hold leadership, based on gender. Based on the interpretation of certain biblical texts, many believe women are not to teach God's word. In the Black Church, pastors, specifically older pastors, preach that a woman's place is in almost every aspect of the church except the pulpit. However, younger generations have begun to change this narrative. So, the question arises, How do Black women feel about their role in the Black Church, and what strategies have they adopted to participate in ministry?"

## **A Brief History of African American Women and their roles within the Southern Black Baptist Church**

My research (Haywood 2022) focuses on the disparities in the treatment of African American women and men in the Southern Black Baptist Church. To understand the lack of African American women holding leadership positions within the Southern Black Baptist Church, one must understand the history of the Black Church in general. Established during slavery, the Black Church became the primary place for enslaved African Americans to worship freely with one another. The Black Church stood as the foundation for oppressed people, brutalized by slavery, murdered, and told when and where to go, during the Jim Crow era. Dealing with racism, the Black Church has provided a haven for African Americans in America. Henry Louis Gates Jr. explains that it is “a place of racial and individual self-affirmation, of teaching and learning of psychological and spiritual sustenance, of prophetic faith; a symbolic space where Black people, enslaved and free, could nurture the hope for a better today and a much better tomorrow” (Gates 2021, 19). Being the foundation of the African American community, the Black Church aided in the success of the African American community. Reverend Al Sharpton states, “I think the Black Church was an incubator because it was the thing we were totally in charge of. We didn’t have any external forces that had to give us permission. Whatever we wanted to do, it was up to us. It was ours” (Gates 2021, 66). McKinney explains that the Black Church was a symbol of freedom for African Americans. McKinney states, “the most important to them was the freedom to worship in their own way, freedom to establish their own churches, and the freedom to select and support their own ministries” (McKinney 1971, 458). Still, although a refuge for many African Americans, the Black Church has had a lot of discrimination within its own walls.

### **Ethnography**

Growing up in South Carolina, I witnessed the lack of women in leadership positions. I grew up in a small town and, my mother made it her mission to raise my sister and me in church. Being raised in a Southern Black Baptist Church, and frequently visiting other Southern Black Baptist Churches within my surrounding area, I witnessed the lack of women

possessing leadership positions throughout the years of my childhood. That experience gave me an interest in studying the disparities in the treatment of African American women in the Southern Black Baptist Church. In this study of African American women holding leadership positions, it was imperative to interview individuals who were, of course, African American and women who held leadership positions, such as pastors, deacons, trustees, and ministers. The interviewees consisted of eight women and seven men. Each interview gave me insight into the lack of women in leadership roles in the Southern Black Baptist Church and to the mistreatment many females endure when holding leadership positions there. But it also demonstrated the strength of current women leaders, the support they are receiving from some men, and the changes that are coming.

Each interview was conducted in private, and most were recorded for accuracy of the quotations. I assigned each participant a pseudonym to hide their identity. Questions were designed to encourage conversation between the interviewer and the participants. Given our common backgrounds, many of the participants interviewed became more than just participants, some were people I had known since I was a young girl.

### ***Reverend and Minister Smith***

Reverend Michelle Smith and Minister David Smith are prominent members of one of the oldest Southern Black Baptist churches in the Upstate of South Carolina. Being licensed in 2001, Reverend and Minister Smith express the hardships they’ve faced over the years as a husband-and-wife duo preaching God’s Word. When asked what his earliest recollection was of a woman holding a leadership position in the church, Minister Smith recalled that he was able to experience his sister and his wife, Reverend Smith, in leadership roles.

I asked Minister Smith to explain how his sister and his wife were received in their roles. Minister Smith stated,

With Reverend Smith, she has always been a trailblazer in whatever she was doing, and I was always supportive and always proud. I took a backstep to make sure she shines and she’s supported. My calling from God was just to be obedient, and whatever his will for my life was, just to be obedient. I wasn’t looking to be a preacher nor

a pastor but, somehow that happened, and sometimes in your mind you think you know what you are doing until He spells it out for you. In my mind and in my heart, I was there to support her and to make sure she was good and respected. We never went into a pulpit without each other, and I've always thought she was the better and most prepared of the two of us.

Minister Smith expressed that although his wife, Reverend Smith, oftentimes was not welcomed into her position or into a pulpit, he supported her. Minister Smith does not believe his calling was to preach or become a pastor. He believes that God called him to simply be obedient by supporting Reverend Smith. Minister Smith supports his wife in any way he can because he believes she is being led by God's calling.

### ***Reverend Kevin Daniels and First Lady Daniels***

Reverend and First Lady Kevin Daniels are a youthful, outstanding couple who are making it their mission to change the perception of the Southern Black Baptist Church. Beginning this new journey, Reverend and First Lady Daniels are both changing the way women are viewed in leadership roles. Reverend and First Lady Daniels make it a point to teach others that anyone, properly trained, has the ability to preach the word of God, regardless of gender.

When asked if he believed women should stay silent in the church, Reverend Daniels stated,

I do not believe how vocal women are today matters. I don't believe there's enough emphasis on being a saved Christian. Female leaders in the church should have the same opportunities as male leaders. I believe if a woman has been spiritually led, the church should make a responsible decision to allow her to serve in the capacity of her heart. I don't believe we should be so stuck on gender preferences and gender roles, but whether they are being used by God and for the Kingdom of God.

Society, generally, views the man as "head of the household," overseeing the actions of his family, his marriage and his wife. But Reverend Daniels believes that the only person who can dictate a woman's calling is God. Within the Bible, according to Reverend Daniels, God used Noah, who was a drunk, to build Noah's Ark, carrying out God's mission to replenish

the earth. In the same respect, God used Rahab, who was a prostitute, to protect the Israelites as they spied on the Canaanites, providing them a place to stay so they would not be caught. Finally, God used a donkey to talk to his servant Balaam. God simply uses whomever he wishes to carry out his Word.

### ***Reverend Dennis***

Reverend Annie Dennis is a momentous figure, leader, and woman of God within the Upstate area of South Carolina. Reverend Dennis is the first Black female pastor of one of the prominent Southern Black Baptist Churches in the area. Being in the ministry for over 30 years and, pastoring for 10 years, Reverend Dennis shared the hardships she has faced while pastoring her own church, being a leader, and while continuing the good fight and spreading God's Word.

I asked Reverend Dennis. How do you feel about women holding leadership roles within the church? Reverend Dennis said,

To be honest with you, what would we do if we didn't have the women? I'm going to be very honest about that because in most of the churches that I've seen, in most of the Black churches I've seen, you have a lot of black women doing a lot of jobs. A lot of the churches don't have a lot of men in there. So, what I've done, the men I have along with the women, I have in leadership roles. I have women trustees, I don't have a deacon, but we have women trustees, we have Sunday school teachers, etc. So, I believe if you have a gift, no matter what your gender is, God wants you to use it, and that's me. I love the fact that I have women who want to be in leadership, so I allow them to be so because I lead. I'm thankful and grateful for women in leadership.

Reverend Dennis explained that it does not matter what gender you are. If God called you to pastor a church, serve as a deacon or trustee, to be a Sunday school teacher, or an usher on the Usher Board, he has blessed you with a gift. So many times, as individuals, we try to run away from the gifts that God has given us. God never fails to tell us, show us, and clarify how these gifts are to be used. For example, during our interview, Reverend Dennis expressed how originally she did not want to teach or become a pastor. She struggled with the idea that God had bestowed the gift of preaching on her. God's will for his Word to be

heard shall always be done. God's guidance ensures the proper use of our gifts, no matter who we are.

In reference to 1 Corinthians 14:34, I asked Reverend Dennis if she believed women should stay silent in the church, not having a voice. Reverend Dennis responded by saying,

No, I don't believe that. A lot of times, that is what I've had to deal with because Paul was talking about a whole other different thing. When they would all come together, and the men and women would come together, they did want the women to be silent, at the time, because we did talk a lot. But he did not mean that women could not speak their minds, because if you look at the Word of God, you had women leaders in the Bible, in the Old Testament. Deborah was a leader, you know, you had different leaders. So, I don't believe that. I think we take it out of contexts, and we have to go back and understand and read what's happening when Paul said that. You know that's the first thing people have said to me that "You know women are supposed to stay silent." But, if women are silent, there's not going to be much being done. I'm very honest about that. When we speak, we get things done. So, no I don't believe that women should stay silent in the church.

Reverend Dennis expressed that oftentimes 1 Corinthians is taken out of context by men who try to justify their beliefs that women should not hold leadership roles within the church. Reverend Dennis believes that women get things done, and if we were made to be silent in the church then much less would be accomplished. Reverend Dennis explained that God wants us, as his people, his believers, to be able to spread His word and to tell unbelievers about Him. None of us can do that if we are made to be silent in the church.

I then proceeded to ask Reverend Dennis, if she believed that women cannot teach God's Holy Word to others, specifically to men? Reverend Dennis responded by saying,

Women definitely can teach God's Word. If they didn't then I wouldn't be preaching, but I'm doing Bible study. I'm excited because I watched the church family, men, also women, and young people, and how they gravitate to what I say. It has nothing to do with Annie, it has to do with God's Word. So, women can definitely, and are able to preach and teach God's Word. He uses who he uses, and

whatever gender he uses to get the word out, I don't believe that women can't preach or teach because, oh yes, we can . . .

According to Reverend Dennis, women can teach anyone men can teach. It is my opinion that when God calls us to use our gift, he does not view our gender as a factor, so neither should we. As Christians, we should continue to spread God's Word helping others gravitate toward Him. As Christians, we must carry out God's ministry, continuing his work begun by the sacrifice of his only Son, who died for the sins of all.

I asked Reverend Dennis if in her upbringing there were discussions held about women holding positions in the church, and she said,

Oh yes. I was brought up in an old Southern Black Baptist Church, and when I was little and small, women stayed in their place, I saw that. Now, we could usher, we could even sing in the choir, and we even had a couple of women who taught Sunday school but, that was just about it. When I was growing up, I saw a lot of women that were not able to hold positions, like trustees, and positions that other men were able to hold, because of our gender. So a lot of that, yes, I grew up with that, until I was called to preach, and I started preaching, and they looked at me differently. I started doing something that I didn't realize I was doing, and that was telling people about the Lord. After a while, people started realizing I was more than just singing and directing the choir. I had something else, I needed to tell people about Jesus.

Being from similar churches, Reverend Dennis and I witnessed comparable situations within our own churches. According to Reverend Dennis, women were not allowed to hold leadership roles, but they could usher, sing in the choir, and teach Sunday school. Men, then and even now, opposed women holding leadership roles within the church. Their beliefs were grounded in the idea that men and women different places, and those boundaries should be respected.

### **Theological Analysis**

Although the backbone of the African American community, the Black Church still has many discriminatory practices against women. This is especially true in the South. According to Henry Louis

Gates Jr., “gender inequality had been an open wound for the Black Church since its inception. Change has been slow, but there is movement” (Gates 2021, 196). The Black Church is falling behind in accepting women in leadership positions. As explained in *This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes that Black women were the driving force that kept the Southern Black Baptist Church going. Although the Black Church isn’t that accepting of women within leadership positions, African American women have made great strides toward spreading the Word of God.

In “The Roles of Church and Community Mothers,” Cheryl Townsend Gilkes explains that although the Black Church lacks Black women in leadership roles, older Black women are revered as ‘mothers.’ Gilkes states, “Church mothers are not only role models and venerable elders—according to some ministers, ‘women who are important for moral guidance within our congregations’—but also older, venerated, Spirit-filled women” (Gilkes 1986, 50). Within the Black Church, it is common for older Black women to be deemed the ‘mothers’ of the church. However, if these ‘mothers’ ever decide they want to preach God’s Word, they would surely face resistance. Black women are often told how they should serve God in the Black Church. But the profession of a woman’s calling to the ministry may be taken lightly, or the notion belittled. According to Gilkes, a calling to the ministry is seen as reserved for men only, and it is no place for women.

Historically, Black women have always held leadership roles in some West African tribes. Jacqueline Carr-Hamilton explains in “Notes on the Black Womanist Dilemma,” women in the Gelede Society of Yorubaland held multiple leadership roles, such as housekeeping, tailoring, and catering. Carr-Hamilton states, “This society is headed by a priestess, the Iyalode, who sits on the king’s council.” Prior to slavery, women typically played key roles in many societies in Africa. Carr-Hamilton explains that in spite of the patriarchal influence of Western European colonization, African people’s perception of motherhood and women’s power would go with them to the New World. Black people in American churches have gotten away from this concept, and now believe that women have a certain place in which they must remain. Carr-Hamilton states, “one of the primary areas of influence for black women in African American culture is in black religion and society, the realities of racism and sexism notwithstanding” (Carr-

Hamilton 2001, 68). Given the racism and sexism Black women face in society, the Black Church should be a safe haven, shielding them from such discrimination, not upholding it. Although the Black Church in itself was and still is that safe place, the Black woman must find her voice within her sanctuary. For example, interviewee Trustee Atkins became the first woman within her church to hold the trustee chair position. Being a member of one of the oldest Southern Black Baptist Churches in Upstate South Carolina, Trustee Atkins sits as Trustee Chair. Trustee Atkins explained when she was appointed to her role, many individuals, especially men, were not thrilled. Her appointment came after the previous male trustee was asked to step down. Trustee Atkins explains that her pastor approached her with the request that she become Trustee Chair. The trustee board was comprised of primarily men, most of whom were not thrilled that a woman was placed as the head of the trustee board. These same men would oftentimes not listen to her during meetings, or help with the day-to-day duties they once did. Although they were not thrilled about Trustee Atkins’s position, she explained that she remains firm in her position and that any woman can hold a leadership role within the church.

The Black Church, specifically the Southern Black Church, male preachers, and male congregants use the Bible to support their belief that women do not belong in the pulpit or in certain leadership positions. Male clergy and male congregants interpret certain passages in the Bible to justify the idea of the gender subordination of women to men. For instance, 1 Timothy 2:12 states, “I do not allow a woman to teach or to have authority over a man. Instead, she should be quiet.” Many male clergy reference this verse, along with 1 Corinthians 14:34, to substantiate the idea that women should be silent at certain times in the church. For instance, interviewee Reverend Vanessa Johnson, recalled a conversation between her parents, both ordained pastors. Her father threatened her mother that because her mother was female, he could take away her license just as quickly as he gave it to her. The depressing truth is that we live in a day and age where men are still not okay with women being more than just their wives, sisters, and cousins. But according to scholars, these verses have been misinterpreted. Teresa Green states, “Black male ministers’ arguments against women pastors are questionable because they compare twenty-first century African American women, many with graduate degrees and extensive theological training, to uneducated first-century

women” (Green 2003, 121). When Paul made the statement that women should be silent in the Corinthian church, he was speaking to the Corinthian culture that did not believe in women getting an education. In the Black Church, male ministers use these scriptures to question female pastors seeking higher biblical knowledge with the intent of sharing that information with congregations as a preacher. Trustee Atkins recalled during her upbringing the discussions that were had about the positions women should hold in the church. Trustee Atkins explained,

During my upbringing, there was not a lot of talk about it, it was just kind of understood that men lead and women followed. I grew up in a Baptist church, and we just understood that women belong in the audience and men belong in the pulpit.

Trustee Atkins explained that, growing up, they were taught that a woman’s place was not in the pulpit. Trustee Atkins shared that on many Sundays male pastors preached that women are not permitted in the pulpit. She recalled a preacher stating that if a woman wanted to preach she should do so from the floor, not the pulpit. This was, in fact, a form of control, challenging the rights of Black women who desire to pursue a role as pastor.

Black women are a thread woven deep into the pattern of the Black Church. According to Green, after the Civil War, Black women played a key role in raising money for the reconstruction of church buildings. During Reconstruction, Black women established ministries that assisted urban areas. Green states, “in these ministries they preached, ran daycare and food distribution centers, and educated those who sought them out” (Green 2003, 123). Although Black men would not ordain them, Black women did not let that deter them from serving the church and their community. For Black women, the Black Church has always been a sanctuary, a refuge from the evils that are committed against African Americans. It is an asylum, of sorts, a place of comfort, that should be free of trials and adversity. Yet, in some situations, it is the source of affliction. LaVerne Gyant explains in “Passing the Torch,” Black women became leaders during the Civil Rights Movement which motivated them to hold leadership positions. Although they did hold leadership positions, many Black men discouraged them from progressing because they didn’t want Black women to “undermine the security and threaten the masculinity of Black men” (Gyant 1996, 641). Some

Black women would remain behind the scenes, but many Black women possessed self-determination, strength, and faith that helped prepare them for their leadership roles. According to Gyant, throughout life, Black women have always held leadership roles in some aspects of their lives. Gyant states, “realizing that the Black man has been systematically denied his dignity, Black women have been in the forefront in the fight for dignity and survival of the Black man, woman, and child” (Gyant 1996, 643). Throughout the Civil Rights Movement, Black women opened their homes to those in need, served as adoptive mothers and religious leaders, all while taking care of the household when their husbands were unable to work. Black women kept their homes and communities afloat.

Historically, during slavery, it was common for Black women to hold leadership roles in the Black Church. Black men and women were, in some respects, equal because of their mutual enslavement. As African Americans became more and more detached from slave culture, a separation between men and women began to form in the Black Church. According to Green, the equality of the Black woman’s role began to decline. Black men began seeing themselves as superior to Black women. Along with this came limitations for Black women to serve in the church. The limitations Black women faced took many forms. Green states, “In addition to their not being granted ordination, the authenticity of the call to the ministry for women was frequently questioned. Even today women preachers have the extra burden of proving their call to an extent not required of men” (Green 2003, 125). So even now, Black women must prove themselves when stepping into a leadership role. During our interview, Reverend Dennis recalled how she was received in her leadership role, not only as a female pastor, but in the ministry overall. She said,

Well, it’s quite interesting, when I became pastor, a lot of pastors believe certain things, like women aren’t supposed to pastor a church, and a lot of them really and truly did not receive me well. A lot of them I truly respected, but they did not like the fact that I was pastoring a church at that time. A lot of questions went to my husband because I pastor, and he does not. We do it together, but God called me to do the pastoring. So most of the time what they would do was ask him, ‘how do you feel about your wife pastoring the church and, you’re not?’ I’m so blessed to have a wonderful husband of 45 years, and he says “God didn’t call me, He called her, and I back her

up 100%. She has been called, anointed, and pointed. God called her and I'm okay with that." I think once a lot of people heard that and saw that my husband was okay with it, and he didn't have a problem with me pastoring a church, I think a lot of people saw that we hung together, that we were together as one, and I think a lot of people say that and saw that it was okay. While pastoring, I still have a few problems when I go different places, but it's okay. A lot of people just look at me, and the older saints, they believe in what they believe in, and I don't have a problem with that because we all believe in what we believe in, but I do know I was called by God.

Although she was called by God, Reverend Dennis faced a great deal of hardship being in the ministry and pastoring a church. Many pastors whom she revered did not agree with her decision to go into the ministry nor did they agree with her pastoring a church. Why? Because she was a woman, and many men did not believe women belonged in the pulpit, nor did they believe a woman should pastor a church. Many men went so far as to ask her husband how he felt about her pastoring a church. During that time, many men believed that if a woman decides to pastor a church, she must ask her husband's permission first. However, Reverend Dennis's husband was ecstatic for his wife because he knew that God had placed a calling on her, and that pastoring a church was her place. Reverend Dennis's husband expressed that God called her to lead, not him.

During the Civil Rights movement, Gyant says, the focus was on men as leaders. Because of the society we live in and our culture, it had always been expected that men would lead and women follow. Women did not resent men being leaders. In fact, Gyant explained, women were joyful to have Black men, during this time, in leadership roles (Gyant 1996, 641). But when women began to accept their calling into the ministry, or they were appointed to male-dominated roles, some men had issues with women taking on leadership roles. According to TeResa Green, "since the ministry was the only avenue to even an illusion of masculinity, the inclusion of women seemed threatening to Black men. The impediments to preaching for Black women were thus further complicated by the perplexing dilemma of Black male identity in a racist society" (Green 2003, 124). Unfortunately, we do not live in a society that is geared to help minorities. The society we live in today takes away the Black man's dignity and masculinity.

The Black church is, at times, the only place where men can still have power. So, although Black men are constantly being disgraced and beaten down by this society, Black women are consistently carrying the torch, and are taking the lead, to salvage the greatness of the Black men.

Thus, although women make up between 66% and 88% of the Southern Black Baptist Church (Barnes 2006, 373), men primarily still hold leadership roles. In the article, "Whosoever Will Let *Her* Come: Social Activism and Gender Inclusivity in the Black Church," author Sandra Barnes states, "African American clergywomen who aspire to the pastorate must often contend with the "triple oppressive reality" of racism, sexism, and classism" (ibid). Just like male pastors, women are also called to continue God's work and spread the Good News. But women are less likely to be welcomed by their male counterparts in such leadership positions. When asked about her upbringing and if there were ever discussions about the positions women should hold in the church, interviewee Reverend Vanessa Johnson said,

Yes, well not necessarily discussions per se, but there was an air that women should not be in the pulpit. There were discussions as well because even my father, who was a preacher, at one time did not believe in women preaching. Later on, in his ministry, he did have some women who came forward and said they were called, and he did license them, but even when he licensed my mom, it took a while for him to do that because she became a preacher. He said, "I have a right to give you this license, and I have a right to take the license back from you." Although I did not agree with that, that is the thought process of the older men in our churches. There were churches here in my community that never asked me to preach in their pulpit because I know for a fact, and their members know and have expressed to me, that their pastors do not believe in women preachers. Slowly, that belief has changed, and more male pastors have begun asking me to preach in their pulpits.

Reverend Johnson describes the difficult situation that many female pastors and women who hold leadership positions face within the Southern Black Baptist Church; elder men of the church do not believe a woman can hold a leadership position or lead a church. Despite the leadership skills demonstrated as superintendents over Sunday school, presidents of

the usher boards, trustee chairs, deacons, and pastors, women are still not being broadly accepted by men of the church. According to Barnes, when women pastor churches their churches and congregations tend to be smaller than churches led by men. Barnes explains that in the Black Church, only about 1% of traditional Black denominations are led by women. Barnes states, “in the Black Church, the pulpit has been viewed as ‘men’s space’ and the pew as ‘women’s place’” (Barnes 2006, 374). The belief of many, men and/or women, is that God cannot use a woman in the same way he can use a man. But as we have seen above, the Bible displayed a different mentality.

Linda Belleville explains in *Women in Ministry* that women hold the same spiritual gifts as men. Belleville expresses that women are to be “encouraged to develop and exercise these gifts to their fullest potential” (Belleville et al. 2005, 24). Belleville states that for traditionalists, “the relationship of male and female continues to be perceived in hierarchical ways. God created men to lead; God created women to follow” (26). But, Belleville states, “Women functioned as prophets during every epoch of Israel’s history” (42).

Within the Southern Black Church, many traditionalists have issues with women who hold leadership positions because they believe that women do not possess the same gifts or authoritative nature as men. Belleville states, “To publicly teach is to exercise authority; to publicly preach is to exercise authority; to corporately lead is to exercise authority (whether one names the leader “elder,” “deacon,” “bishop,” “pastor,” “chairperson,” or “president”)” (Belleville et al. 2005, 81). It is this exercise of authority that many men object to, despite the many examples of strong women in the Bible, such as Eve, Sarah, and others, who were not perfect, but leaders nonetheless.

Although some Southern Black Baptist Churches do not believe women can hold leadership positions, there are denominations that believe differently. For instance, interviewee First Lady Kevin Daniels recalled her earliest recollection of a woman holding a leadership position growing up in the African Methodist Episcopal denomination. First Lady Daniels said,

I would say [I saw a woman in ministry in] early childhood. I am originally AME, which is my denomination even though my husband is a Baptist preacher. I converted over, but I still consider myself AME. Being in the Baptist church, I have noticed

that it is a hard embrace whenever women are placed in leadership positions. However, with the AME church, it has been something I’ve seen since I remember going to church as a little girl. We call them ‘stewards’, but they are kind of like deacons in the Baptist faith. We also have women trustees, women ministers in the pulpit, etc. Women held a role just as the men did in the AME church as they still do today.

First Lady Daniels expresses the enormous inequality women face in the Southern Baptist denomination compared to the African Methodist Episcopal denomination in which she was raised. First Lady Daniels explains that she was raised seeing women in leadership roles: there were female stewards (deacons), trustees, ministers, even pastors—all roles that are primarily held by men in the Southern Black Baptist Church. In “The Role of Women in the Sanctified Church,” Cheryl Gilkes highlights women’s contributions to the Sanctified Church. According to Gilkes, women made remarkable contributions to the advancement of the Sanctified Church because women made up much of the church. Gilkes states, “It is the enterprise of black women that provides the urban settings in which traditional black religion is able to thrive and to provide a haven for cultural developments . . . the failure to appreciate the roles of women within the churches and the roles of the churches in the lives of women has led to a lack of appreciation of the ways in which black women shaped this religious tradition” (Gilkes 1986, 34-35).

Despite the hindrances in the Black Church i.e., the Black men and structures who oppose them, the Black Church is a place Black women can still find a sense of security. According to Marbley, “the Black Church is and has been for decades an emotional support system and the most important social institution in the African American community and the one in which African American women (as opposed to African American men) constitute the base” (Marbley 2005, 610). Without Black women, the Black Church would not continue to be as instrumental in the Black family as it is today. Black women make up the majority in any Black denomination, financially contributing by way of fundraisers and means of increasing revenue for the upbuilding of God’s Kingdom. If it had not been for Black women and God, the Black Church probably would not be standing today.

## Implications for Christian Practices

Feminist theology is a movement created to empower women and overturn patriarchal beliefs. It can be a key to changing the belief in the church that women are unable to hold leadership positions, along with how they are perceived in religious institutions. Additionally, it focuses on reexamining scriptures that seem to view women as being inferior to men, and on changing how women see themselves.

Feminist theologians make it a practice to fight against the injustice of women in religious institutions. Although they believe religion has oppressed women, they still believe religion can provide resources for encouraging women, such as the Bible, which is the root of inspiration that empowers women who deal with gender discrimination. Another resource is other women and men who believe women can hold leadership roles. These individuals empower women through their support when dealing with gender discrimination. In "Feminist Theology as a Revitalization Movement," Amanda Porterfield suggests that many feminist theologians, specifically Jewish and Christian feminist theologians, attempt to change the sexist interpretations of the biblical God. Jewish and Christian feminists defend religious institutions receptive to feminist issues. They consider God a symbol of freedom from oppression rather than a symbol of paternal authority. Instead of focusing on the masculinity of Christ, Christian feminists focus on the positive relationships Christ had with women, as well as on the love and compassion he displayed toward them. To Christian feminists, God represents freedom.

Amanda Porterfield explains that feminist theology can be viewed as a revitalization movement. According to Porterfield, Anthony F. C. Wallace defines revitalization movements as "deliberate, conscious, organized efforts by members of a society to create a more satisfying culture" (Porterfield 1987, 236). A revitalization movement is the act of giving new life to new a cause. In this case, feminist theology qualifies as a revitalization movement because feminist theologians are changing the perception of women within religious institutions in order to "create a more satisfying culture." Feminist theology grew out of the different concerns feminists had surrounding Western culture, along with a desire to see Western civilization abandon its patriarchal beliefs, practices, and institutions.

In "The Future of Feminist Theology in the Academy," Rosemary Ruether explains that patriarchal theology is when "the male is taken to be the normative and dominant representative of the human species" (Ruether 1985, 704). From an anthropological view, cultures around the world deem men superior to women. But from a biblical standpoint, the image of God is both male and female (Genesis 1:27), and patriarchy is a result of the fall (Van Leeuwen 2009).

Feminist theology continues to advance. According to Ruether, three stages aided in the evolution of feminist theology. Its first stage, according to Ruether, is the criticism of the masculine belief attached to theology. In theology, women may face misogyny in the form of not being seen. Ruether states, "The invisibility of women can never be seen by those for whom the generic "man" is simply assumed to include "women" (Ruether 1985, 706). In mainstream theology, women are overlooked because men believe women do not have a place in the conflicts of religion, despite receiving training and credentials comparable to their own. By slowly unmasking the full impact of androcentrism on theology, feminist theologians can begin to change the views that prevent women from holding leadership positions in religious institutions. Ruether explains that androcentrism not only views men as generic humans but also views women as being naturally mindful of their position or place, and a mediating force between male subjects. Basically, men believe women do not have the ability to hold leadership positions on their own, and should be assist religious institutions by acting as a support system.

Some men believe women should not be in leadership because they are responsible for the evil caused by Eve in the Garden of Eden. Eve ate fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The mythological lore of Pandora's Box also presents a negative view of women and alleges their role in the dawn of evil. As the myth is told, Pandora was curious about what was in a box left in her care. In this box were death, sickness, and other evils that were released into the world as a result of her opening the box. These beliefs, Ruether states, "reinforce the patriarchal definition of woman as subordinate and auxiliary, by claiming that woman caused evil to come into the world by speaking and acting autonomously" (Ruether 1985, 706). According to Ruether, women are then subject to punishment for the past sins they committed. Some believe that women attract negativity. Ruether states, "If a man rapes her, it is

presumed that she ‘asked’ for it. If her husband beats her, it is because she has provoked it by her complaints. That she must have ‘deserved it’ defines the basic stance of patriarchy toward assaults on women” (707). Feminist theologians highlight the issues with victim-blaming ideologies in mainstream theology and mythology.

The second stage of feminist theology that Ruether identifies is one of discovering alternative traditions. Alternative traditions or Non-Religious Movements are culturally based beliefs, such as Santeria, Cults, etc. Alternative traditions sometimes support the personhood of women. According to Ruether, the quest for alternative traditions takes the form of feminist studies that affirm a woman’s personhood, her equality in the portrayal of God, and her participation in teaching and leadership. Ruether states, “this does not mean denial or cover-up of patriarchal bias, but rather a demonstration that, even amidst this bias, there are glimpses of alternative realities” (Ruether 1985, 707). According to Ruether, women are agents of the divine Spirit, constantly aiding in the mission to bring more souls to Christ and helping to build God’s church. Ruether highlights how alternative traditions occur in various periods of Christian history. In the Early Church, Middle Ages, and Reformation, women participated in various roles, such as church mothers. Those stories regarding women in leadership roles have been concealed throughout history. Ruether states, “those women who have been lifted up for us as models by the tradition have been selected by men and have functioned, by and large, to reinforce male ideologies about female roles” (708). Men have attempted to censor the roles women played throughout the Bible and church history, but such history has survived, nonetheless.

According to Ruether, women should be regarded as the powerful beings they are, and not be silenced. Patriarchal tradition conceals and censors the authority and dignity of women who held leadership roles throughout the Bible. Moses’ sister Miriam for example, was named co-equal leader with Moses and Aaron. However, when Miriam criticized Moses, she was in turn criticizing God because Moses was commissioned by God to deliver His people from bondage. God, in turn, punished Miriam by making her a leper. Ruether states, “She becomes like one whose father has spit in her face; that is, has totally repudiated her as a daughter. God is said to be the father who has spit in her face” (Ruether 1985, 708). Another patriarchal tradition attempts to censor Mary

Magdalene. According to Christian tradition, Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. However, God used her, and she became a leading apostle to Jesus. She was also the first witness to Jesus’ resurrection. Ruether explains that Mary was commissioned by Jesus to share the good news that he had arisen with the male disciples. Under patriarchal tradition, women were not identified with their leadership roles but were heavily identified with the roles that showed they were inferior to men. For instance, many highlight that God used Miriam to help deliver the Hebrews out of bondage. Patriarchal tradition, however, highlighted the fact that Miriam was punished because she criticized a man, Moses. Mary Magdalene is highlighted as being a prostitute, although Jesus used and taught her, under his leadership, to become an apostle. Ruether explains that like Miriam and Mary Magdalene, other women’s stories have been shared partially to maintain the subordination of women to men. Ruether states, “They have been defined as heretics, witches, or lunatics, their writings have been destroyed and their memory survives only in the negative judgments made against them” (ibid.). Feminist theologians read between these narratives, deciphering good works and leadership roles women have held, to dismantle patriarchal theology.

The third and final stage of feminist theology takes the form of tentative efforts to reestablish theology after the feminist critique and the consideration of alternative traditions. Ruether explains that feminist theologians must now operate not only as critics of the past but as “constructive theologians for a contemporary community of faith, for a contemporary understanding of church which seeks to live its faith as repentance of sexism, exodus from patriarchy and entrance into a new humanity” (Ruether 1985, 710). According to Ruether, feminist theologians should enter into a new humanity, not just critiquing the past, but taking the past and changing it for the future, leaving behind patriarchal Western beliefs.

A more radical view advocates focusing on God as female. Richard Grigg explains in “Enacting the Divine: Feminist Theology and the Being of God” that women should view God as a Goddess, one who empowers women, rather than as a male being. Grigg explains that focusing on God as a Goddess creates a sense of closeness for women to God. According to Richard Grigg, “Goddess is the self-affirming being of women” (Grigg 1994, 520). Grigg explains that divinity should be a way for women to tap into themselves, and relate to the power of being, and to nature. Grigg states,

“Goddess is not to be equated with nature, but understood as a special kind of relationship that can obtain between women and nature. The Goddess is born when women come to understand their rootedness in nature and finitude and claim the power that such rootedness confers” (ibid). Worshipping God from a woman’s perspective is important to her role as a leader, enabling her to achieve God’s purpose as it is specifically aligned with her life.

Feminist theology highlights the mazeway (or cultural mental map) that feminist Christians have suffered from because of patriarchal tradition. In this mazeway, women are belittled, not allowed to hold leadership roles, and endure constant discrimination and sexism in religious institutions. Porterfield explains that a new mazeway needs to be created. She suggests that in this new mazeway sexism would be viewed as a sin, instead of being praised as God’s order. Porterfield states, “the overcoming of sexism is the redeeming work of God, the human experience of conversion, transformation, a new being, and new community” (Porterfield 1987, 242). Overcoming sexist beliefs is crucial to the continuation of religious institutions. Through feminist theology, this kind of cultural transformation can take place. However, Porterfield explains that feminist theology hasn’t reached this level of cultural transformation because of the continued control of religious institutions by patriarchal authorities. Until more men accept the new view, women will not be considered equal.

Rosemary Ruether explains that biblical institutions belong to women, as well as men. As women, we have a right to lead in religious institutions. Women have a right to preach, a right to lead a church and a right to leadership roles in the church. Being licensed in 2001, interviewee Reverend Smith recalls the discrimination she has faced in the ministry. Although Reverend Smith has been preaching God’s Word for over 22 years, when asked how she felt about women taking on leadership roles within the Black Church, Reverend Smith said,

I believe women can hold leadership roles within the Black Church. My husband said he would not go into a pulpit without me. But, in his home church in Haines City, FL, they don't have women in the pulpit, and a lot of times when he goes, they'll ask him to preach for that particular Sunday. But I've never been invited and so I don't ever hold him back. I tell him to go on and preach. I'm still a preacher in the pulpit, I'm still a child of God in the

pulpit or in the bleachers. But yes, I believe women can hold leadership roles within the church. His church is still old, they are Old Missionary Baptist Black. I've even had some of their deaconesses come to me and say they're sorry, but we're not there yet. But I tell them I'm fine. I'm still here.

Being a woman in a leadership role herself, Reverend Smith believes women can hold leadership roles. Reverend Smith explained that women will continue to face hardships within the Black Church because of their gender. Reverend Smith shared that when she and her husband, Minister Smith, travel to his home church, Reverend Smith is not invited to join the other clergy in the pulpit, much less preach. Minister Smith’s home church still firmly believes women have no place in the pulpit. Although many women are disheartened by this act, Reverend Smith explains that at the end of the day, she is still a woman called by God. It is in situations like this that feminist theology can help churches to reconsider whether to allow women to be in the pulpit.

## Conclusion

Despite gender discrimination, women are working to overturn patriarchal control in Southern Baptist churches, aiding in the modification of the southern Bible Belt. Throughout African American history, women have been involved in many key moments, from Harriet Tubman, also known as “Black Moses” who led thousands of slaves to freedom, to Sojourner Truth, who fought to legally free enslaved African Americans—from Angela Davis, an activist who fought for African Americans' rights and freedom in the 1960s, to Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman to run for president. Throughout society, Black women have held leadership roles in some form. Despite patriarchal control, Black women continue to work for the advancement of the African American community and the Black Church.

People repeatedly forget the contributions Black women have made in the Black Church. Black women have invested substantial amounts of time aiding in its growth and development. Despite the constant discrimination and sexism, Black women have held leadership roles in the Black Church. Now Black women are pursuing theological education to help reshape the Black Church. Black women are driven to make changes that will positively steer the future of the

Southern Black Baptist Church, ultimately impacting the African American community.

The Black Church has been and will continue to be the backbone of the African American community. But, until the Black Church faces its own issues of gender discrimination against Black women, the advancement of the Black Church will be hindered. According to Helene Moore-Haywood:

The Black woman is and always will be a force to reckon with. This foundational being serves as a reflector of all the negativity the world hurls at her: rage, grief, hate. Yet, somehow, she is able to take those same ingredients and mold them into hope, passion, and love. The needs of the generations she will birth fuel the necessity of her survival. What choice does she have?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Helene Moore-Haywood (Teacher for the Visually Impaired) in discussion, October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

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