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Religious Authority in African American Churches: A Study of Six Churches

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Abstract: A sociological study of religious authority and gender in the context of a rural, impoverished community was conducted in African American churches in one county of the Arkansas Lower Mississippi Delta region to understand relationships between religious leadership, gender, race, and social justice. Three female and three male African American pastors were interviewed as key-informants of their churches to investigate views of female religious authority, and to compare and contrast the congregational culture of female-headed vs. male-headed churches. Among male-headed congregations, views of gender and leadership were complex, with beliefs ranging from no support to full support for female-headed congregations. Two congregational cultures emerged from the data: Congregations with a Social Activist orientation focused on meeting the social needs of the community through Christ, whereas congregations with a Teach the Word orientation stressed the importance of meeting the spiritual needs of the community through knowing the Word of God. Although aspects of both congregational cultures were present to some extent in all six congregations studied, the Social Activist culture played a more dominant narrative in female-headed congregations, whereas the Teach the Word culture was more evident in male-headed congregations. This study reports preliminary information about gender and religious authority in rural African American churches by revealing the different clergy training requirements and church placements of female and male clergy, a myriad of views about female religious authority in the African American faith community, and through uncovering two distinct congregational cultures. This study also enhances understanding on the role of gender in Black churches' perceptions and interactions with rural, socioeconomically challenged communities.

Keywords: religious authority; women; religious leadership; congregations; culture; gender

1. Introduction

Female-headed congregations are a controversial issue in many faith-based communities, where religious institutional policies, social norms, and faith and cultural beliefs limit women's involvement in religious leadership. The majority of examinations of women's roles in the church in the sociology of religion literature have included individual-level and institutional-level analyses. Individual-level analyses have examined characteristics of clergy women [1] compared to clergy men [2,3], barriers clergy women face [1], negotiation with doctrinal constraints [4,5], and others' (men, lay audiences) views about women's role in the church [6,7]. Institutional-level analyses have examined policy changes within denominations regarding female leadership, investigating what factors contribute to early adoption of policies including women in leadership positions [8]. Few studies have conducted organizational-level analysis at the congregation level beyond demographic differences (e.g., church size, organizational resources) [9] to understand the similarities and differences between female vs. male-headed churches, particularly the cultural distinctions [10]. Organizational-level analyses are important because individual-level analyses do not provide information about the broader factors that shape individual perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and practices; and policies at the institutional level do not necessarily reflect the actual practices at the organizational level, a phenomena known as 'decoupling' [8,11,12].

The Black church has been studied extensively at the organizational level as an agent of social change [13]. A large body of literature shows that African American churches are powerful leaders in addressing inequities and social problems, and continue to distinguish themselves as central providers for the underserved [14], and in defining the values and norms of communities [15,16]. However, little research has examined the role of gender in religious leadership in Black churches. The higher prevalence of female-headed congregations in African American congregations [9] compared to white congregations indicates support for female leadership. However, other studies of African American churches have reported opposition to women as religious leaders because of theological, cultural, and social reasons [17,18].

Social activism in the Black church may be an important factor in whether female religious authority is accepted or opposed. For the purposes of this paper, social activism is defined as advocacy to combat low socioeconomic status (including poverty), and racism stemming from inequities [17]. African American congregational stances about the importance of empowering all marginalized groups, including women [17], may encourage female religious leadership [17]. Black churches in communities with a high need for social activism may also show less resistance to female-led congregations despite theological and cultural beliefs because the level of community impoverishment is such that support from any organization, whether female or male-led, is desperately needed.

Studies that have examined the complex and contradictory relationships between gender and religious authority in the Black church have assessed differences in Black vs. white church

characteristics [9], and beliefs and attitudes within the Black church about female clergy [17,18]. However few have compared and contrasted the beliefs and practices of female-headed *vs.* male-headed African American churches located in socioeconomically marginalized communities, and the role of the community context in congregation activities by gender. Would being located in an area where the need for social activism is acutely salient inform the church's views of female religious leadership? How would church practices and beliefs differ by whether headed by a woman *vs.* a man? What are the relationships between gender, race, poverty, and religious authority within the Black church? The following sociological analysis sought to take the initial steps to answer these questions by exploring congregational beliefs about female religious authority and the organizational cultures of female- and male-headed African American congregations in a rural, impoverished area. Given the preliminary and exploratory nature of the study, no hypotheses were developed. This work joins with other work in gender and religious authority by examining these relationships on an organizational level in the African American church. This study provides an initial step to organizational analyses examining the congregational culture of gender and religious authority in African American churches in the context of the Black church's response to a community with severe socioeconomic needs.

2. Methods

Three female and three male African American pastors were interviewed as key-informants of their churches to investigate views of female religious authority and to compare and contrast the congregational culture of female-headed *vs.* male-headed churches. For the purposes of this paper, organizational culture is defined as the congregation's "ways of doing things" and "ways of talking about things" that distinguishes themselves from other congregations [10,19-22]. Within a particular congregational culture, members will exhibit a similar organization of beliefs, attitudes, and practices [10,23]. Pastors were selected using a snow-ball sampling technique. The author used her current networks to recruit three pastors through word of mouth. The three pastors then referred the author to three additional pastors who met the recruitment criteria (leader of an African American church in one county of the Arkansas Lower Mississippi Delta region). The author recruited these three additional pastors through word of mouth.

The congregations examined in the study are located in two communities of one county of the Lower Mississippi Delta. The Lower Mississippi Delta is a predominately rural region bordering the Mississippi River in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi [24]. Characterized with low levels of educational attainment [25] and high poverty rates [26], the social and economic needs of the area are great, particularly among African Americans. Studying African American congregations in the Lower Mississippi Delta is ideal in understanding gender and religious authority in the context of a socioeconomically challenged community because of the high numbers of African American congregations in the area [27], the high relevance of religiosity in the area [28], and the marked racial/ethnic disparities in socioeconomic status and other outcomes [29].

The interviews were conducted over a two month time span in the spring of 2011. Five congregations were located in one Arkansas Lower Mississippi town with a population of 1091 [30], and one congregation was located in another comparable Arkansas Lower Mississippi town (population of 271) approximately 13 miles away from the other churches [30]. The congregations

represented Baptist, Pentecostal, African Methodist Episcopal, and Non-Denominational denominations. Membership numbers ranged from 10 to 100. Female-headed congregations reported membership numbers ranging from 10–100. Male-headed congregations reported membership numbers ranging from 15–50.

The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of questions about the church's history, the theological beliefs of the church (including its views on female religious authority), the church's strengths and weaknesses, the church's present programs, the church's relationship to the community and world, and how the religious leader came to lead the church. Demographic and other descriptive information about the religious leader of each congregation was also collected, including how long the religious leader had served at the congregation, the age of the leader, and the highest level of education completed. Additional questions about how the religious leader decided to enter the ministry, the training they received to become a religious leader, and how the religious leader came to lead the church were also asked. Questions from the interview guide were selected from a previous interview guide that had been used in a previous study of organizational culture and women's leadership [10]. The questions were then adapted for the current study's purposes. The interview guide is located in the Appendix. Each interview lasted from 50 minutes to over two hours. Informed consent was obtained and all participants were given \$25. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim into text for analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo 2.0 by the author in accordance with standard qualitative methods that included: independently identifying response patterns, reviewing the patterns to develop codes, and coding the data into categories [31,32]. A grounded theory approach to data analysis was used, where the transcribed data were read in line-by-line detail, salient responses highlighted, and patterns and themes identified. The code names were then refined and a codebook was created based on the study objectives and themes that emerged from the data. A member check was conducted where the six pastors validated that the salient themes were represented appropriately. The study was approved by the UAMS Institutional Review Board.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Data

Religious leaders had served as the pastor or reverend of their congregations for 1–28 years. Female religious leaders had served as the leader of their congregation for 1–28 years. Male religious leaders had served as the leader of their congregation for 2–19 years. The religious leaders ranged in age between 44–65 years, and represented a myriad of educational levels, including high school graduate, bachelor's degree, associate's degree, master's degree, and doctorate degree. The highest level of education completed for female religious leaders ranged from bachelor's degree to master's degree, whereas the highest level of education completed for male religious leaders ranged from high school graduate to doctorate degree.

All the religious leaders described their entrance into ministry as the result of what the respondents termed a "calling" from God. The decision to enter the ministry was perceived as a response to the call, rather than a self-chosen path. Most religious leaders said they would have not chosen to be a

religious leader if it were by their own desire; some religious leaders reported initially resisting their calling.

“I was at church on a particular Sunday... and the preacher was preaching about ‘Don't be afraid to accept your calling. Have you accepted your calling?’ And for some reason or another, that sermon caused me to become very disturbed. And I... felt guilty as though I had not accepted my calling, and I began to ask myself and ask God, ‘What is it that you want me to do?’ ...And the next thing you knew, I ...had come before the congregation and I said ‘I accept my calling into the ministry’... I wasn't thinking about becoming a pastor... That was the last thing on my mind.” –Male headed Church E

“I ran for many years [from the call]... I didn't want to be a preacher... I...became a gang leader... selling drugs. And the alcohol went with it...I was pretty much in and out of jail and consumed with alcohol and drugs. And I had an accident where I slid under a lawn mower and cut my baby toe off. And that was when I really began to...take inventory. And evaluate, you know, is it worth it? And I knew... even along those times, I knew that I was supposed to be a preacher...it was confirmed through prayer and the Lord speaking to me. ...when... that toe was cut off, I was slowed down to a place where now I can't...run the streets. I'm on a crutch...And I went out and got beat... So, when I came in on the crutch with blood running down the back of my head, in front of my face, I said, ‘I need to answer this call’ because I had had friends that died...and I was just tired...And that's where I accepted the Lord.” –Male headed Church F

The calling came in generally two forms, through a desire or through a supernatural experience. Two of the three leaders of the female-headed congregations reported a supernatural calling that consisted of hearing an actual voice, seeing Jesus, or sensing the presence of a spiritual being.

“It wasn't just something I decided to do, it was a real calling. From the time I was a child, I heard a voice calling me. ...the first time I heard the voice, I was probably somewhere between 8 and 11... The voice...was...the voice of my mother. It would just call my name...and through the years, even when I was not in the same city with my mother, I kept hearing the voice and it continually got closer... The voice had become so close that it was about as close as that door...it called my name so furiously that I jumped out of bed and... I was literally trembling, shaking...Two weeks later, I was lying in bed... and there was a being, the presence of a being at the foot of my bed that called my name so sweet, soft mellow; the voice of a male, called my name, ‘Preach my gospel.’ There was a being on the side of the bed then that grabbed my throat...The being at the foot of the bed spoke again, called my name, ‘Preach my gospel.’ And the being on the side grabbed my throat again. I didn't say anything to anybody for a long while... I finally confessed it to my pastor and told my pastor what had happened. He said if that's what God called you to do, do it, I'm with you. If that's what God called you to do, you've just got to release yourself... So it wasn't that I just decided I was going to go into the ministry, it was really a call into the ministry.” –Female-headed Church A

“...when I was a little girl, I saw Jesus in the hallway. I was about 5 or 6. I'll never forget. Then he told me I had a calling on my life and God would call me someday to do something really special. Well of course you go on and on in your life and you live. But when I turned in

my mid 20s...I started really... getting into church...I started going to church and... I just started reading the Scriptures more...When I really gave my life to Christ was when my baby girl was born three months early. They were saying she was going to die, and I made a promise to God and I told him that whatever it is you want me to do, I will do. If you want me to go, I will go. This is what I told the Lord and about 5 years after that, that's when I got the call. When I say the call, I was sitting in church and it was as if the Lord was talking to me and said, 'Now I need you to go.'" –Female-headed Church B

It is unclear why female religious leaders were more likely to report a supernatural calling compared to male religious leaders. Perhaps, given the resistance female clergy face, a supernatural call was necessary for these women to enter into the ministry; *i.e.*, the women needed to be certain that they were called by God to be religious leaders, given the numerous challenges they would face that would challenge their calling. The challenges female clergy faced were elucidated to some extent in the training they received to be religious leaders.

The religious leaders reported undergoing training before leading a congregation that included informal training through a mentorship relationship with another religious leader, years of formal training required by the denomination, and receipt of a bachelor's degree in Christian education. The majority of leaders of male-headed congregations were trained through mentorship relationships with other religious leaders, whereas all the leaders of female-headed congregations received years of training as part of their denomination. All the leaders of male-headed congregations came to be the leader of their congregations through another religious leader's help. Two leaders reported that their churches were given to them by the church's previous pastor who wished to retire from the church. In contrast, leaders of female-headed congregations either began their own church or were placed into a church by their denomination. One leader of a female-headed congregation spoke of the double-standard of training and church placement by gender.

"With the [church's denomination], you go through... a four year training. You must have some seminary... They have their own training where you go through like 4-5 years. Now the women, we had to travel those five years in our training... The men come in and get churches... I tell you it's discrimination all the time... they go straight to churches. Most of them they come on in oh brother so and so and they send them straight to a church." –Female-headed Church B

Thus to some degree, there were differences in the type of calling, training, and church placement experiences by the gender of the religious leader. Although the majority of the leaders interviewed reported that their entrance into ministry was not a personal preference, female religious leaders reported more supernatural-type callings, the receipt of more formal training before leading a church, and a lack of mentoring relationships that provided opportunities for them to lead their own congregations compared to male religious leaders. These descriptive data provide an important context through which to view the results of the subsequent organizational-level analysis. As religious leaders in part can shape a congregation's culture, understanding the religious leader's background and experiences gives a richer perspective on the organizational culture of the congregations studied.

3.2. Views about Gender and Religious Authority

Views about gender and religious leadership were elicited to determine the extent that female-headed congregations were accepted. As expected, the female-headed congregations were supportive of female religious authority. Two male-headed congregations were not supportive of female clergy, whereas one male-headed congregation was supportive of female-headed congregations.

Both female and male-headed congregations reported a preference for men to lead men-specific groups, and women to lead women-specific groups (e.g., women's ministry, men's ministry).

"...there is so much a man is going to tell me as a woman. Just like there's so much a woman is going to tell a man as a female. There are areas that men understand each other...like their relationships with women... Teaching them how to be a husband. I can tell them how good my husband is but I can't teach them how to really be a good husband. I can give them what I think, but I really don't know what they actually feel and that's where [a male leader] comes in. He's a man and he's walked in those areas. Young men come in and tell me different things, but sometimes every now and then there is a little block because they're not sure if they can really go there and tell [a female pastor]..all of that, whereas with a man they can just pour it out."—Female-headed Church B

"Naturally I'd want a female to lead ladies ministry and a man to lead men ministry... simply because of identification. Men know men and can lead men better than women can lead men. Women know women and are able to lead women better than men."—Female-headed Church A

However, there were considerable differences regarding the view of female clergy. Two of the three male-led congregations said that leadership positions (e.g., deacon, pastor) were reserved for men only because of Biblical belief and practice:

"Well as a pastor, the churches I've pastored wouldn't select a woman, wouldn't select a female as pastor...their belief and thought on that would be based on the Bible. The leadership of the church family is in the Bible, those positions were male positions... The churches try their hardest to use the Bible as a guide in faith and practice. And so that would be their reason..."—Male-headed Church D

"Gender in some positions is not a problem, but when gender, when it comes to having dominion over the community or the church, there may be some exclusions... But if, say for instance, the pastor of the church- it is my belief that the pastor is the leader and has dominion over the entire flock. So therefore, that person should be that of the male gender...The best example I could give is that when God created Adam-He brought everything that was created to him for him to name and to supervise. So when we talk about dominion, we're talking about who is actually over that which God has created."—Male-headed Church E

However, despite Biblical beliefs about women in leadership positions, Male-headed Church E expressed that female-headed congregations may be a valid option if men did not fulfill their leadership role. Although female-headed congregations were not the ideal situation, it was seen as a feasible option if the circumstances warranted it.

“...if the man is not the right kind of leader, the woman takes over... the leadership...That's the reality of it. And I can't blame them. That's not how it was intended to be. But... in many situations, that is the situation...men, many times, fail to be the leaders. So as a result of that... is the woman sees fit to take over... and that includes being the pastor of the church. So you will see in today's society many women... have claimed to be pastors. And I can't dispute their calling... the man was originally intended to be the leader and be of dominion over everything that God created. It sounds like a contradiction. However, I'm having to remember that I don't know it all... I only know parts of the glory of God. I cannot- my mind is not his mind. My thoughts are not his thoughts...So I'm only going by the knowledge that I have received... I'm leaving it open- so that should God, you know he is able and strong and powerful enough to do whatever he wants to do...He is able, strong enough, and wise enough to use anybody he wants to use. So I'm not going to close the door to the point or the fact that he could use a woman to be ruler.” –Male-headed Church E

Thus the community context of the availability of good male leaders played a role in the degree of acceptance of female clergy by some male-headed congregations.

Congregations supportive of female religious authority interpreted the Bible differently than congregations not supportive of female-headed congregations.

“...in Genesis... God said 'them'. He didn't say specifically 'him'. He gave 'them' dominion...And I go there often...I believe in research and in detail- Trying to find the true meaning of why certain things were said. So I believe from the beginning... that woman was...I address it as the 'male man' and the 'female man'...I've had several pastors... asked about that because of the controversy. And I always tell them never teach or preach what you can't prove... that's why I go to Genesis and I show them in the Bible- What it's saying where they'll understand that from the beginning it wasn't- and I never liked this... the woman is supposed to be behind the man and all that...” –Male-headed Church F *“They go by the writings of Paul when he wrote in 1st Timothy of the woman you know being quiet and be still. But they also have to remember the times where the people were. But if you go ahead and read in Paul...that Phoebe was a minister and for them to be good to her. So therefore depending upon where you live, if you pay attention, that's why I said it is so important to be taught and understand what is written in the Bible because we find ourselves ignorant out there.” –Female-headed Church B*

Thus there were mixed views about female clergy. As expected, all of the female-headed congregations were supportive of female clergy and believed that the Bible supported female religious authority. Within male-headed congregations, however, opinions about female leaders were complex. The majority of male-headed congregations (2 out of 3) were not supportive of female religious authority because of their interpretation of the Bible, but within this group, one male-headed congregation expressed a willingness to accept female leaders if the situation warranted it, although this was not seen as ideal. Denomination appeared to play a stronger role than gender in whether women were seen as legitimate religious leaders. The two male-headed congregations that did not accept female religious authority were Baptist. Congregations in the community that were not Baptist also acknowledged that lack of support for female clergy was characteristic of the Baptist

denomination. However, the preliminary nature of the study precludes definitive conclusions about the role of denomination and gender in the degree of acceptance of female religious authority.

For two of the three female-headed congregations, the gender of their religious leader made it difficult for the congregation to accomplish its goals. African American male religious leaders were perceived as the strongest opponents to female religious authority.

“...This is a very anti-woman preaching area. I have been fought tooth and nail and that's just an expression, but I have been fought by men, women, pastors, churches, even to the point that the Christian radio station... will not advertise anything from our church because I am a female pastor.... African American male pastors have taught their congregation specifically against me, against the church, against women pastors... I have actually had individuals tell me how their pastor preach against me.” –Female-headed Church A

“We have to fight for everything that we do. You know it's as if we have to be 120%. We can't stop at 100%. For example, we have been denied even to use the radio stations right there in [Town P]...We were denied because of being our gender and they said they don't believe in female pastors and we were not allowed to use our radio station... I thank the Lord because you just can't worry about people's opinions...I try to tell people, we're not here to tear you down or run against you, we're just trying to do things together. But we do, as women, and in [this county], whew! It is really rough.” –Female-headed Church B

“I have a much, much greater respect from and support from the Caucasian community than I do the African American community; much greater respect. There are literally African Americans who will see me and turn their head or say something harsh or won't speak or if they speak, they speak in a very mean and derogatory way. And that is because pastors have taught the people, they have actually had sessions and had conferences, called conferences and taught the people against the woman pastor and against me.” –Female-headed Church A

“I want you to know...we still, in 2011, are fighting silly stuff. We face discrimination as female pastors all the time. So we are still fighting discrimination. And he's not white, this is a Black man... We are accepted and I work even up here... with white churches and different people. I don't want to say whites aren't prejudice, but they have not prejudice when it comes to female pastors and they give you the utmost respect.” –Female-headed Church B

Thus for the majority of female-headed congregations in the area, beliefs on female religious authority to some extent tarnished the congregations' reputation in the community, barred congregations from community resources, and served as an obstacle for female religious leaders to overcome in leading the church. The religious leader of the one female-headed congregation that did not report gender discrimination did not reside in the community as the other female religious leaders, thus the religious leader's place of residence may play a role in the degree of perceived resistance female-headed congregations experience from the surrounding community.

3.3. Congregational Culture

The data was examined to determine if distinct congregational cultures emerged from the data. Then the extent that female-headed and male-headed congregations exhibited these cultures were compared and contrasted. As described earlier, congregational culture is defined as the congregation's "ways of doing things" and "ways of talking about things" that distinguishes themselves from other congregations [10,19-22]. Within a particular congregational culture, members will exhibit a similar organization of beliefs, attitudes, and practices [10,23]. Two congregational cultures emerged from the data: 'Social Activist' and 'Teach the Word' (*i.e.*, Bible). The terms 'Social Activist' and 'Teach the Word' were selected by the author based on the data analysis. Social activist congregations emphasized meeting the community's social needs in tangible ways through the power of Christ. This often included the provision of food and other resources, education to promote employment, and programs to overcome drug and other addictions. Teach the Word congregations emphasized the importance of salvation and spiritual growth through studying the Word of God. This included reaching out to the community through evangelism to proclaim the message of salvation, Bible studies, and Sunday School classes. Aspects of both cultures were present in each of the six churches, with both female and male-headed congregations displaying both Social Activist and Teach the Word cultures. However, to some extent, the Social Activist culture played a more dominant narrative in female-headed congregations, whereas the Teach the Word culture was more evident in male-headed congregations. The congregation's vision and central beliefs, perceived needs of the community, and desired interaction with the community determined whether the congregational culture was Social Activist or Teach the Word.

3.4. Church's Central Vision and Beliefs

All six congregations spoke of the important message of salvation through Jesus Christ as a central church belief. However, in Teach the Word congregations, salvation through Jesus Christ and study of the Bible was the church's most predominant or sole central belief, whereas in Social Activist congregations, the message of Jesus Christ and study of the Bible was seen as a central belief in conjunction with the vision to meet the community's social needs.

A primary vision of a Teach the Word congregation was cultivating its faith through learning the Word of God.

"The primary goal is to go to Heaven and to cultivate the faith so strong that we will not miss the opportunity to go to Heaven and live eternally with Jesus. [We cultivate the faith through] Sunday school, which is primarily teaching and discussing the word of God. Morning service which consists of preaching the word of God...The bible class on Wednesday evenings is concentrated on teaching the word of God and discussing the word of God." –Male-headed Church E

The main vision of another Teach the Word congregation was to leave behind a church building for the next generation to worship God in the Baptist tradition, where the next generation would have a physical place to cultivate their faith through the study of the Bible.

“...our vision is to... leave a building that would be available for the... group of young persons to come along after us...to leave... a place of worship and that others would be able to come along after us and carry on... worshipping God in the Baptist tradition...” –Male-headed Church D

In contrast to Teach the Word congregations, Social Activist congregations emphasized the importance of meeting tangible community needs (e.g., food, clothing,) in addition to teaching the Word of God.

“One of our scriptures is ‘Go into the highways and hedges and bring them in.’ So we’re renewing, restoring and rebuilding [the community’s] faith and strength. In doing that, it’s showing people that the church is...to be a part of the community all year round, 7 days a week. When I say that, I mean the church giving back....If there’s a need, we want to be able to meet it. That’s pretty much what we’ve been doing, just kind of renewing, restoring and rebuilding people’s confidence in the church again... we are [also] a teaching ministry. That really goes before the renewing, rebuilding and restoring. Teaching people...the Word of God... starting in the beginning of the Bible to the end...so they can have a foundation, so they can build on that foundation. –Female-headed Church B

“The church is based on social justice. The AME church...is the church that did the first walk out. They got up and walked out and said, ‘I am not going to take it.’ So when Civil Rights came, we had already started Civil Rights by Richard Allen. Can you imagine a former slave, and other former slaves, walking out of a church of white people who used to own them, did not like them, and did not respect them? What it took for them to walk out thinking they might just kill us? If they don’t kill us today it might be tomorrow or next week. We did the first Civil Rights then. I love the history of the church, the social justice, and our mission of feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. That is what we are about.” -Female-headed Church C

In general, female-headed congregations tended to exhibit a more Social Activist culture compared to male-headed congregations. This may have partly been a function of denomination, as the religious leader of one female-headed congregation spoke of her congregation’s denominational roots in social justice (AME). Among male-headed congregations, the one congregation that supported female religious authority demonstrated a more Social Activist culture compared to the other male-headed congregations.

“I would like to see... people [in the congregation] develop in what they...love to do... and help people... I would like to see them become part of the ministries...I...desire to see more outreaches in this ministry. You know, just come out where people will serve... the community...Outreach- things that really help people to grow to develop, and especially in their health.” –Male-headed Church F

Thus congregational support for female religious authority (regardless of the gender of the religious leader) may be more indicative of a Social Activism congregational culture than the gender of the congregation’s religious leader. The role of denomination may also be an important factor, with congregations of a Baptist denomination exhibiting primarily a Teach the Word congregational

culture. Given the exploratory nature of this study, definitive conclusions about the role of gender and denomination in congregational culture cannot be made. However, this study provides preliminary ideas for more sound conclusions to be made in future studies examining relationships between gender and religious authority.

3.5. Perceived Needs of the Community

The majority of congregations perceived the high prevalence of poverty and unemployment as one of the most challenging issues in the community. Social Activist congregations were keenly aware of the community's socioeconomic problems, and how rurality and race contributed to the situation.

“It is poverty. They are just poor. It is not going to change because they are dependent on the government for change and the government is not giving, they are taking back. At that age you are dependent on Medicare, Medicaid, and any other government assistance you can get. It is a sad situation.” –Female-headed Church C

“There's a poverty mentality that when you talk to people, they can't see themselves rise above where they are. That's a poverty mentality. You do not have an education. You do not have a job. You don't really own anything, but you can't see yourself rising above it. So, there is negative response to anything positive you say about becoming better...From African Americans, I have heard a lot of blame on the white people or the white man...Blame for them being in the condition they're in.” –Female-headed Church A

“...in a rural area, you can really see the needs of the people...When I came here, it was like wow, and you... see that there are people in need of a lot of things; people that can't even afford to pay \$200 rent. ...so just being in that area makes you want to do more; makes you want to help... a lot of [people in the community] are just unemployed. That's one of the biggest challenges. With them being unemployed, it's hard to feed their families. Especially for the elderly, if they have land, then they can't get food stamps...[the community] used to be farmland. So back in the day the farmers always had work to do. But now because if they don't have a car, if they aren't educated, they can't even get out... to work... So that...plays a big role as far as being unemployed... You live in the city, you can get on a bus and go to work. But in [this area], there is no bus or van traveling from his town to that town. So these people can't even get out to get jobs if they don't have vehicles.” –Female-headed Church B

“I believe race plays a role in rural communities because it's not always whether or not you're qualified, it's a matter of who do you know... if I know this man, then I can get this job because he knows this guy; because that's how people get their jobs in these communities.” –Female-headed Church B

Teach the Word congregations were aware of the high rates of unemployment and poverty in the community as well. However, they differed from Social Activist congregations by describing, in addition, how the community's social challenges affected the church, particularly how the rural, low-income nature of the community precluded the church's receipt of the resources needed to provide spiritual nourishment to the community.

“These are rural churches and... they're just outside the rural area and the population around there is[a]very low population around the church. It's rural, and when we say rural we're talking about country, we're not talking about rural as in city rural; you know you would drive outside the street and see a few trees. We're talking about down where gravel roads and dirt roads meet. It means that you may not be able to get as much done as you would like to get done... So you have low man power, you just have less people to work with, less members to work with. Being in a low income area an obstacle would be you may have less tithing. That's what the low income area would be, less tithes.” –Male-headed Church D

“[Being in a rural area has] something to do with it as far as the number of members because the town, itself, is about 1300 people. Not very many people here and the young people are still moving out because there is no job, no opportunity for them to advance...They move away if there are no jobs. They follow the job. Families are leaving. So that causes a decrease in the church membership also. And the financial support of the church.” –Male-headed Church E

“I see the church trying it's best to, I think it's concerned about... where the church will be and who will be there in the years in the future because the congregation...is mostly an aged congregation. And so I don't think they're so much worried about what kind of programs to have as they are about whether or not there will be others to come along to worship there after them.” –Male-headed Church D

Thus Social Activist congregations' predominate narrative about the community's greatest challenges was of its social ills, whereas the effect of the community's social problems on the church was the primary narrative in Teach the Word congregations. All three female-headed congregations were Social Activist, in addition to the one male-headed congregation supportive of female religious authority. These results suggest that the role of gender in congregational culture is not clear-cut, but rather gray. Support for female religious authority may be more indicative of a congregation's culture than whether led by a female or male.

3.6. Interaction with the Community

The congregation's perceived needs of the community informed the congregation's current and desired activities in the community. Teach the Word congregations perceived the rural, impoverished community environment as a major obstacle to the community's spiritual needs. Thus evangelical activities were needed to save souls, grow the church, and build the community in the knowledge of God's Word.

“I would really like to see us doing more evangelistic work... that would be interacting with the community...reaching those unchurched and reaching out to talk with those that are unchurched and also those who are unsaved... And by unchurched, what I mean by that is that person may have had a connection to the church, but at this present time does not have a connection to it. Or they may say they have a connection to a particular church, but have not been there as an active member in you know a number of months, years... I'd just like to see us try to get closer to doing the commission of the church and what we were commissioned to do

and that is to go out and try to reach those who are lost and who are unchurched and who are unsaved.” –Male-headed Church A

“I would like to see people in the community going to church more often and participating in church activities. I encourage...outreach, evangelism...the only obstacle I could say [to successful evangelism] is... people choosing to do their own thing... other than going to church service.” Male-headed Church B

In contrast, Social Activist congregations believed it was the church’s responsibility to ameliorate the community’s problems as part of their mandate of faith. Christ was seen as the agent of change necessary to restore the community.

“I’d like to see us involved in doing things that’s going to really help families... whether that’s giving Thanksgiving dinners or Christmas dinners...to be involved with city council to see... [what’s] needed that our church can do to help them in the city... Just helping people, I think that’s what the church should do... That individual that’s on alcohol or drugs, if we’re able to teach them, nurture them and help them to see that you really can come off of drugs; you really can come off of using alcohol...You have to make up your mind that you want to do that, and allow us to help you. God is able to help you through this...Christ changes the lives, not programs.” –Female-headed Church A

A poignant example of the difference between Social Activist and Teach the Word congregations were their divergent perspectives in reaching out to the youth in the community. The majority of congregations of both cultural orientations spoke of the importance of focusing on the community’s youth, and the role of race and rurality in exacerbating the youth’s needs.

“The... program came about definitely because of what I see in the city of African American males, just in the day time when men should be either at work or school and they’re walking around doing nothing...That was based on what I saw around me. The target was always African American males because that’s what I see walking the street, getting in trouble, doing nothing productive...It’s open to everybody, but...you really do not see the white teenagers out. Basically, you wouldn’t even know there are any in the city. You do not see them. You do not see them so it’s African Americans that I see that’s out in the street, noisy, loud, cursing, fighting...And they have nothing. They have nothing. There are two swimming pools here, but they’re labeled private. Before, when I was young, they were just simply labeled white only. Ok, as time went on and the people realized they can’t get away with that, it was labeled private, which is basically here pretty much mean the same thing. So there is nothing...” –Female-headed Church A

“I think race plays a part in the conditions in which the whole area lives in...because of the racial past and because of underlying racism even now...in times past, segregation has separated the races and for a long period of time. Even though there is legal amendments or laws on the books that says there is no segregation of this, that and the other, segregation is in the hearts and minds of the people. We live in an area where there is still a group of people trying very hard to send their children to a private school. So they’re not looking to integrate in

a way which would give you true integration, so you can't help but say if one group is still trying hard to segregate their children to go to a private school only miles away from where the public school is, one can guess that they're only trying to do that; one might say because the educational prep is better, but it's obviously a big difference that race has a part to play in it.” –Male-headed Church D

Teach the Word congregations stressed the importance of the youth’s spiritual development, and the importance of teaching youth the Bible so they could continue the church’s spiritual legacy.

“I think it's the parents' responsibility to make sure that the children receive spiritual development. If the parent does not do it, the children will not have anything to hold on to or to develop spiritually. They need to make sure that they go to the church of their choice. Regularly, frequently. And by them going, they will receive teaching from that church.” –Male-headed Church E

“I... have a desire for not only our church members but for our local district association to have some type of program where we... do some classroom work with some youth...what I'm talking about in classroom work, I'm talking about... Bible study, character study, things of that nature in a classroom type setting; not a formal classroom type setting where everybody is sitting in a row but a classroom type setting where people would be sitting in a circle and you would have this discussion and you would have certain Biblical principles and precepts that you would be studying and going over and trying to understand... Then the community type work would be the evangelistic part of it where you would go out and perhaps even knock on doors and bring what you have learned in the classroom to those who you would engage.” – Male-headed Church D

“I would like to see more participation of youth, more programs for youth... my priority is the youth because the youth are the future of the church... That's the priority right there is the youth because they are the future. So we need to have somebody to train up in order to take over as we leave this world.” –Male-headed Church E

In contrast, Social Activist congregations expressed how the church could help the youth through providing recreational activities, Biblical studies, and education to broaden their future opportunities. Recreational and educational resources were seen as a gateway to draw youth into the church and grow in the knowledge of Christ.

“After school and in the summer, there are teenagers, girls and boys, that are just out in the street, up and down the street. They're loud, they're fighting, sometimes it's groups of them. There's one fight going on; it's a whole group of them that's following this fight down the street. Just really basically with nothing to do. So a community center would give them some place to go to play basketball or volleyball or we could have classes with them and allow them to play and have classes with an understanding that ok, we're going to have maybe a ½ class before play time. So this would be something to give them to do and also teach them at the same time because I see on the street there are teenagers, and they're very young, cursing like sailors.

Somebody is not teaching at home. So maybe we can pick up that slack and give some help in that area” –Female-headed Church A

In [this community], kids will walk up and down the street all day long. I have watched it. I told some of the other leaders, I said what are they doing all day? When a child is walking the street all day long, that’s potential for a child to get into trouble...We want to be able to have activities this summer while we’re doing the summer school program where we can play basketball, outside things they can do and at least you know where they are... We are geared a lot toward the youth...because I do believe if... the church can catch some of these kids...then crime would go down... school can only do so much because school, parents aren’t keeping their children then the church needs to come up to step up and really be part of the community. –Female-headed Church B

“The community center [would] try to draw young people off the street to have something else to do because there is nothing else in the city basically for the young people to do and that is one way we can do outreach, by reaching into the community bringing these young people in and then teaching them and helping them along in life and eventually, hopefully be able to get them on into the church and learn the right way of Christ.” –Female-headed Church A

Thus, Teach the Word congregations emphasized the importance of spiritually feeding the community through saving souls, providing Biblical teaching, and providing a place to foster spiritual development, *i.e.*, growth in Christian character. In contrast, Social Activist congregations emphasized the importance of demonstrating their faith in Christ and show His power through meeting the community’s tangible needs, such as the provision of food, treatment for drug addiction, and educational programs for future employment. Teach the Word congregations were Baptist in denomination and not supportive of female religious authority, whereas Social Activist congregations were supportive of female religious authority and included female and male-led congregations. Both Teach the Word and Social Activist congregations stressed the importance of reaching the youth in their community, but differed in how they desired to reach the youth. Teach the Word congregations emphasized the importance of encouraging the youth’s spiritual development through Biblical studies, whereas Social Activist congregations saw the church as the provider of what the youth did not have—education and activities—to broaden the youth’s future opportunities, and use as a gateway towards spiritual development.

4. Conclusions

This study explored the role of gender and religious authority in African American churches located in a rural impoverished area through examining the personal characteristics of religious leaders, congregational views on female religious authority, and congregational culture. Although there were some similarities between female-headed and male-headed congregations (salvation message of Jesus Christ, perceptions of poverty and unemployment as significant community challenges), there were also some apparent differences.

Female clergy tended to report a supernatural calling into ministry and more barriers than male clergy to lead a congregation, including more intensive preparatory training, a lack of mentors, and

fewer opportunities to lead a congregation of their own. Given the great number of barriers faced by female clergy, a miraculous calling may have been needed for the female religious leaders of the area to accept their call into ministry.

Gender discrimination also appeared to be present at the organizational level, with female-headed congregations reporting less access to resources to conduct church activities and non-acceptance by some segments of the community. African American male pastors were perceived by African American female pastors as presenting the most opposition to female religious authority. Some male-headed congregations explained that the lack of support for female clergy stemmed from their adherence to Biblical principles. Rejection of female religious authority was viewed as necessary to preserve the church's identity. For some male-headed congregations, not recognizing the legitimacy of female religious authority was not an issue of gender discrimination, but instead a necessary belief to preserve the truth as illustrated in the Word of God. Yet not all congregations interpreted the Bible similarly. Denomination also seemed to play a role in the acceptance of female clergy, with Baptists expressing the least support for female religious authority. However even among Baptist churches, there was an openness to female religious authority because of the lack of male leadership. In a rural impoverished community, where the population is dwindling and men are given few opportunities to lead through employment and financial stability, there may be more supportive views about female clergy because of the lack of persons available to serve in a leadership capacity, even among denominations that do not recognize female religious authority.

However, it is unclear why some female religious leaders identified African American male pastors as their strongest opponents and white male pastors as their advocates. Tradition may encourage the importance of empowering Black males, as illustrated by the civil rights movement where women played more supporting roles and men played more leadership roles [17]. Given the impoverished nature of the community environment, the need to empower Black males may be particularly acute, thus in addition to preserving the Biblical identity of the church, Black male pastors may oppose female religious authority to preserve the tradition of Black male empowerment. In a rural, impoverished area characterized by racial discrimination, the church may be one of the few places left for Black males to be in power. Thus, protecting one of the last available domains for Black male leadership may be another reason why African American male pastors are less supportive of female clergy than white male pastors.

Two distinct congregational cultures emerged from the data: Social Activist and Teach the Word. Both female-headed and male-headed congregations demonstrated aspects of both cultures, although the Social Activist culture played a more dominant narrative in female-headed congregations compared to male-headed congregations. Although all the congregations perceived the community's most challenging problems as social in nature, their response to the community's challenges differed markedly by their cultural orientation. Social Activist congregations saw it as their responsibility to meet the community's social needs and aimed to transform the community through providing social services through the power of Christ. Given the double oppression of race and gender faced by female-headed churches, a Social Activist culture may have been more salient to female-headed congregations. Teach the Word congregations stressed the importance of salvation, heaven, and knowing the Word of God, perhaps to emphasize what the community did have (instead of what the community did not have), to focus on what socioeconomic circumstances could not take away, and to

build the community's spiritual strength to continue in the midst of poverty and inequality. Although a Teach the Word culture played a more dominant narrative in male-headed congregations, both male-headed and female-headed congregations illustrated aspects of both cultures. In addition to gender, denomination also appeared to be related to congregational culture, with Baptist churches demonstrating a more Teach the Word cultural orientation. Future studies that examine these relationships longitudinally with a larger sample size to make denominational in addition to gender comparisons will be necessary to establish relationships between gender and religious authority. The current study provides an initial step towards examining these relationships.

So what does this study tell us about the relationships between religious authority, gender, race, and social justice? The relationships between them are complex. Within a rural, impoverished area, female religious authority was not readily accepted, particularly by African American male religious leaders. The gender of the religious leader appeared to partly inform the congregation's response to a community in desperate need of social activism, with a greater number of female-headed congregations leading activities and providing resources to meet the community's social needs and a greater number of male-headed congregations calling the community to focus on the eternal, on a reality separate from the world. In addition to gender, denomination also appeared to play a role in the congregation's culture.

This work joins with other work in gender and religious authority by examining these relationships on an organizational level in the African American church. This study provides an initial step to organizational analyses examining the congregational culture of gender and religious authority in African American churches in the context of the Black church's response to a community with severe socioeconomic needs. Future studies can build off of this work by testing whether the congregational cultures identified are general models among rural African American churches, and whether these models are indicative of gender.

Given the controversial nature of the topic, gender and religious authority will continue to be an interesting topic of study, and will continue to be a source of tension and conflict in African American faith communities. In one rural impoverished area of the Lower Mississippi Delta, the needs of the area were being discussed and addressed by both female-headed and male-headed congregations. Despite the controversy surrounding gender and religious leadership between the congregations, the work of all the congregations, regardless of the leader's gender, appeared necessary to bring about the change both wished to see.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

- 1) Maybe you could start by telling me what you know of how your church was started?
- 2) How did the church come to be in its present location?
- 3) About how long have you been the pastor of this particular church?
- 4) And in terms of the _____ denomination? How long have you been a pastor in this tradition?
- 5) Were there other churches that you worked with before coming to [insert name of organization]?
- 6) What do you see as the central beliefs of the congregation?
- 7) How are leaders chosen? What are the conditions for leadership?
- 8) As the pastor, what do you see as your role in the church? For example, what's your role in interpreting theology for the congregation?
- 9) Since you have been a pastor at this church, how have you seen the church change?
- 10) As a pastor, what's your vision for where this congregation is going—in terms of programs?
- 11) Are there any models for building a church that have been particularly helpful to you—or have taught you a lot? Any particular books you have read that have been helpful?
- 12) What do you think the congregation is really good at?
- 13) In what ways do you think the congregation needs to grow?
- 14) What role would you like to see congregation members have in the lives of one another?
- 15) How do you see your congregation as being different from other kinds of churches?

- 16) Who makes up your particular congregation?
- 17) Where do you think the members of this church generally come from?
- 18) For people who are coming from outside the streets right around here, why do you think they travel to come to this particular church?
- 19) Let me ask you about some specific programs—What do you think your most successful programs are?
- 20) Does the congregation have different programs for men and women? In what kinds of ways?
- 21) In what ways would you like to see people in this congregation interact with the local community?
- 22) If it's a vision of the congregation to reach out to the local community—what kinds of activities would you like to see people doing in the community?
- 23) What are the particular kinds of people/ people groups the congregation feels a particular mission to serve/ or reach out to?
- 24) How does the ethnic or racial make-up of the congregation play out in the types of activities your congregation participates in?
- 25) Name some of the other congregations your church does things with. What kinds of activities do you do together?
- 26) What do you see as the place of this congregation in national or local politics?
- 27) What do you see as some of the most pressing challenges for people in this neighborhood?
- 28) What are some of the obstacles in serving this particular neighborhood?
- 29) How did you come to decide to be in ministry?
- 30) Could you tell me a little about the training you went through before becoming a pastor?
- 31) Why did you decide to pastor this church?
- 32) Could you tell me how old you are?
- 33) Are you married or in a long term partnership? If so, what does your spouse/partner do for a living? What is their race/ethnicity?
- 34) What do you do for your work?
- 35) Could you tell me a little bit about your educational background?
- 36) How about children? Do you have children? If so, how many and what ages?