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ABSTRACT

During the past century researchers from various disciplines have explored the dynamics of the Black Church. This study attempts to explore the agenda-setting process of the Black Church relative to adolescent sex behavior. Specifically, this study will examine the agenda-setting role of selected Black Churches in Dougherty County, Georgia. Concentrating on the Southern Black church is a critical perspective due to the alarming statistics pertaining to minority adolescents’ risk-taking behavior in the Southern region. Given the inhibitions on providing adolescent sex education and the increasing number of adolescents engaging in sexual activities, health agencies have aggressively sought diverse forums through which adolescents can access information about health relationships and sexual behavior. Though the value conflicts of the church are on-going concerns for many scholars, several contend the Black Church has the potential to be a tremendous agent of change for adolescent sexual behavior.
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“The Church has always been the center of the Black community” says the Rev. Vashti M. McKenzie, pastor of Payne Memorial A.M.E. Church in Baltimore and one of the pioneer Black pastors of traditional Black Churches. “We have done more than preach the gospel, we have found ways of going beyond Sunday morning to ministering to people every day.” (Ebony Magazine, Dec. 1999)

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

During the past century researchers from various disciplines have explored the dynamics of the Black Church (Best, 1998; DuBois, 2003; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Woodson, 1945). Sociologists, anthropologists, and other scholars have examined the ways in which the Black Church influenced public policy formation that affects the lives of its constituency. These efforts have generated ongoing debates pertaining to the church’s relevance and role in implementing significant change in the Black community. More recently, there have been conferences, think tank gatherings, and symposiums focusing on the agenda of the Black Church. The politics surrounding faith-based interventions remain a key point of discussion, particularly those interventions targeting social services issues [i.e. welfare, health care, and AIDS] (Billingsley, 1999; Smiley, 2001, 2003; Smith, 2004).

According to Tavis Smiley, a prominent African American television and radio personality, intellectual discursive engagements are vital to the promotion of successful interventions. Smiley’s think tank events have provided insightful exploration of the issues that are affecting the Black community. His efforts have generated substantive and provocative discussions of issues including politics, health, and finance that have captured the attention of the Black public (Barnes, 2004a; Smiley, 2001; Smith, 2003; Starling, 1999). During the past six years, Smiley has assembled dozens of Black leaders representing the political, religious, and academic arenas from across the country. Moreover, the focus of events such as the Million
Man March, and the State of the Black Church forum have served to diminish denominational and regional conflicts within the collective of the Black Church and community (Billingsley, 1999; Newman, 2003; Smith, 2003).

Research suggests that clergy play an important role in communicating with Blacks about politics, economic development, and social issues (Mitchell, 2004; Mukenge, 1983; Nelsen & Nelsen, 1975; Newman, 2003). As early as 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois discussed the significant contributions of the Black church in shaping the values, beliefs and practices of its community (Best, 1998; Billingsley, 1999; DuBois, 2003; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). For the purpose of this study, the operational definition of a Black Church includes both a micro and macro level: 1) it is a predominately Black congregation led by a Black pastor and leadership; and 2) it is the collective of religious organizations of similar denominational governance, history and doctrine that consist of Black leadership, ownership, and support. It is important that I briefly explicate the distinction between my usages of the term Black Church. The phrase “the Black Church” evolved as an expression to denote the shared historical experiences and ideologies of Black Christians (Billingsley, 1999; DuBois, 2003; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Maffly-Kipp, 2001; McCall, 1986; Mukenge, 1983; Nelson, Yokley, & Nelson, 1971; Pinn & Pinn, 2002; Woodson, 1945). The phrase also encapsulates the longstanding intimate relationship between the Black Church and Black community.

Many scholars posit the Black Church as a thriving social institution that has provided social and cultural resources for the Black community that were not available via any other network (Billingsley, 1999; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Pinn & Pinn, 2002; Woodson, 1945). Historically, Du Bois (2003) suggested that the Black Church is a “mighty social power; but it needs cleansing, reviving and inspiring, and once purged of its dross it will become as it ought to
be, and it is now, to some extent, the most powerful agency in the moral development and social reform” (p. 208). From a unified perspective, the Black Church is traditionally defined by a set of ideas that call for liberation, justice, and humanity for Blacks, in addition the Black Church created a communal space for Blacks (Mukenge, 1983; Overacker, 1998; Richardson, 1999; Sherman, 2000; Smith, 2003; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004; Woodson, 1945).

The Black Church as a whole involves order and church polity that operates across denominational divisions. There are over seven denominations that comprise the Black Church including the: African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME); African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ); Baptist; Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME); Church of God in Christ; Presbyterian; and United Methodist churches. These denominations are very structured organizations consisting of memberships that exceed 2 million, multimillion dollar resources, and affiliates across nations. Within each denomination there are local churches that are actively associated with the larger judiciary body. However several denominations have experienced differing levels of fragmentation within its organization during recent decades. These fragmentations have led to the formation of new denominational organizations such as the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship and the Progressive Baptist Convention (Maffly-Kipp, 2001; McRoberts, 2003; Smith, 2003).

Oftentimes, denominational fragmentation is the result of irreconcilable differences in implementation of strategies and ministerial direction (Billingsley, 1999; DuBois, 2003; Hamilton, 1972; Maffly-Kipp, 2001). Because dissension exists within the organizational whole of the Black Church I must consider the individualize operation of the Black Church in this study. Some scholars contend the Black Church should never be viewed from a monolithic perspective, it does not function as a unified entity and can not be conventional defined as such
(Jones, 1979; McRoberts, 2001, 2003; Sutton, 1992). For the purpose of this study I apply a dialectic perspective in defining the Black Church. To understand the phenomenon of the Black Church one must take into consideration both its organized collective and individualized relationship; in addition to the relational fluctuations that has existed for decades. These fluctuations are related to areas I attempt to address in this study, the church’s relevance and usefulness.

Though the Black Church is purported to provide social support for the unmet human and health service needs of the Black community, it has been argued that its influence has been filtered and reduced since the Civil Rights era (Best, 1998; Fullilove, 2001; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). According to Lincoln & Mamiya (1990) the Black Church struggles with relevance and resolution regarding the problems adversely affecting its body. The malaise of racism, drug abuse, child care, health and welfare, housing, and unemployment continue to plague the Black community. Although debates regarding the struggles and challenges of the Black Church continue, there are scholars that contend the Black Church remains an integral social institution in the Black community (Barnes, 2004; Haight, 2002; Mukenge, 1983; Nelson, Yorkley & Nelson, 1971). It is in the context of these debates about the community role of the Black Church that the current research project was developed to examine the agenda setting processes of the Black Church. This study explores its relevance to the growing concerns of adolescent high risk sexual behavior. Specifically, this research focuses on the ways in which the agenda of the Southern Black Church addresses and shapes policies associated with adolescent sex education.

The leadership role of the Black Church is viewed as an effective vehicle for addressing salient issues affecting its constituency. Political officials and other public agencies often seek
the utility of the church’s platform to champion their causes (Best, 1998; Coyne-Beasley & Schoenbach, 2000; DuBois, 2003; Haight, 2002; Newman, 2003). The Black Church has traditionally assumed the critical role of reproducing culture within the community. Historically, the Black Church worship experience has included cathartic release stimulated from a spiritual and emotional charge far removed from oppressive weights. An opportunity for fellowship and communion was also a vital part of the spiritual experience (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; McCall, 1986; Mitchell, 2004).

From its inception the Black Church has been and continues to be more than a place of worship. It is an educational center, family-life center, social gathering place, political engine, and place of refuge and restoration (Barnes, 2004a, 2004b; Billingsley, 1999; DuBois, 2003; Frederick, 2003; McCall, 1986; Mitchell, 2004). Theologians and scholars alike have consistently acknowledged the historical advocacy of the church; however there are tremendous challenges the church must address today including: HIV/AIDS crisis, high-risk behavior of youth, and economic empowerment (Brachear, 2005; Gable, 2005; Johnson, 2001; McCall, 1986). Dr. W. Franklin Richardson and several other Black clergymen have come to embrace the notion that the message of healing and hope must be extended to incorporate the challenging issues affecting the Black community today. Franklin stated, “We (the Black Church) need workshops for pastors to make them more informed. We ought to discuss AIDS and its implications in our Bible studies and in Sunday School with our young people…” (p. 156).

Recently, many scholars, activists, and clergymen have focused attention on the dire state of African American youth (Chapin, 2001; Coyne-Beasley & Schoenbach, 2000; Crosby, Wingood, DiClemente, & Rose, 2002; DeHaven, Hunter, Wilder, Walton, & Berry, 2004). There are alarming increases in teenage pregnancies and infectious diseases among African
American adolescents over the past three decades. Multiple reports provide evidence that African American adolescents in the South are significantly affected by sexual risk behaviors (Chapin, 2001; Coyne-Beasley & Schoenbach, 2000; Crosby et al., 2002).

Although the majority of previous research pertaining to sexual risk taking has primarily targeted Caucasian adolescents, researchers have begun to focus on the minority adolescent population (Ball & Austin, 2003; Chapin, 2001; Coyne-Beasley & Schoenbach, 2000; Crosby et al., 2002; Miller; 2002). This is a critical shift due to the rate at which African American and Hispanic adolescents are disproportionately affected by the consequences of sexual risk-taking behaviors (Chapin, 2001; Dutra, Miller, & Forehand, 1999; Miller, Forehand, & Kotchick, 2000). According to information provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), from 1994 to 2003, in the United States the largest number of AIDS diagnoses, STDs, and HIV cases occurred in adolescents and adults. African Americans are reporting contraction at epidemic proportions, as much as 30 times higher than Caucasians.

Of paramount concern is the fact that a significant number of Black Churches are failing to address the needs of African American youth (Kotchick, Dorsey, Miller, & Forehand, 1999; L.King & Hunter, 2004; Maffly-Kipp, 2001; Meier, 2003; Parker, 2003). The statistics pertaining to African American youth sexual behavior are disproportionate in relation to other ethnic groups. Therefore additional research is needed to explore the problems and generate solutions relating to African American youth high-risk behaviors. This research seeks to understand how African American youth in the South are influenced by the Southern Black Church experience and how relevant the church’s message is regarding youth sexual behavior? In particular, I examine the role of the Black Church in rural Georgia regarding combating high risk sexual behavior of its youth by investigating churches in Dougherty County.
According to reports by the Georgia Department of Human Resources and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 500,000 Georgians were diagnosed with an STD within the past ten years. Teenagers and young adults aged 15-24 years accounted for the largest percentage of 18,541 cases of gonorrhea reported in Georgia. After the advent of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in this country, African Americans, especially the adolescent population, has been disproportionately typified among cases of HIV/AIDS, STDs and teenage pregnancies.

Georgia is one of 16 states in the United States with a population of 1 million or more, which is projected to increase to 40 million by 2010. Considering all states, Georgia has a devastatingly large number of reported AIDS cases. Though tenth in population size, Georgia has the eighth highest cumulative number of reported AIDS cases; and the seventh highest rate of AIDS among all states as well as number of persons living with AIDS (www2.state.ga.us/Departments/DHR/facstd1.htm; www.cdc.gov). The Black Church can not afford to ignore this phenomenon, because the quality of life in rural communities continues to deteriorate.

The agenda of the Black Church is complex; however provisions must be given to the sexuality realities it is currently facing. The Black Church has to consider the tremendous possibility it has toward effecting social change by using its voice and resources to eradicated sexual health disparities. Hence, this study examined the agenda setting process of Black churches in Dougherty County which is located in the rural Bible Belt region, in the heart of the sexual risk epidemic.

In chapter one the literature review summarizes three specific areas: Black Church history and social activism, the church’s sexuality agenda, and health agenda. The first part of the chapter provides a brief historical account of the Black Church’s role as an advocate for
social justice and equality. The second part consists of a discussion of the Black Church’s relationship with sexual politics. The final section discusses the Black Church’s health initiatives.

Chapter two presents the theoretical background, an overview of agenda setting, which is the theory that guides this study’s investigation of the Black Church’s agenda setting processes, specifically the attention given to adolescent sex education. Agenda setting provides a lens through which one can view the relationship between power relations in Black Church and interpretation that shapes congregants’ behavior.

Chapter three explains the methodology utilized in gathering the data for this study and the research questions that guided the investigation. A discussion of the setting, procedures, sample, and data analysis is provided. Also presented is a discussion of the purpose of the study, survey instruments and interview questions that ask about the church’s local and denominational agenda, particularly the implementation of its adolescent sexual education initiatives.

In chapter four, the results of the descriptive study are provided. These findings include a comparison between the contemporary versus traditional Black Church. A discussion of pastoral agency and the local agenda is followed by an overview of the findings pertaining to the youth agenda and sex education. Finally, chapter five presents a general discussion of the findings, limitations of the study, and recommendations for the Black Church and future research.
For centuries the Black Church has served as a monumental oasis in the Black community. Even today African Americans continue to find peace and refuge in the sanctuary of its walls which extend well beyond the brick and mortar that identifies the physical structure. It is a place of refuge and restoration from the atrocities of life for many (Barnes, 2004; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; McCall, 1986; Overacker, 1998). The Black Church is an institution that was birthed out of slavery; it is one of few organizations where Blacks have maintained a free hand of governance. It remains one of the few institutions financed, owned and controlled by the Black community and continues to control access to the largest audience within the community (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Mukenge, 1983; Nelsen & Nelsen, 1975).

The Black Church has survived several stages of identification: African, Colored, Negro, Black, and for some, African American, much like the stages of its people (DuBois, 2003; Nelsen, Yokley, & Nelsen, 1971; Sherman, 2000). The Black Church has been characterized as the church of the oppressed, driven by a theology of survival and hope, as well as Black culture. It became the operational center for many of the prominent ministerial/political leaders such as Richard Allen, Alexander Crummell, Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Best, 1998; Hamilton, 1972; Woodson, 1945).

The South birthed the first Black Churches, which are distinct products of Black culture, forged by unique Black experiences. The first Black Baptist Church was established between 1773-1775 in the South, Carolina; however it was during the 1800’s that more Blacks were able to leave their masters churches to establish their own places of worship (Sherman, 2000; Taylor, 1994; Woodson, 1945). It was also during the 1800s Black Churches organized their own
conventions that provided financial resources to support foreign mission, and promote the spiritual and physical welfare of Blacks. The three primary concerns of the conventions were foreign and home mission, and education (DuBois, 2003; Sherman, 2000; Woodson, 1945). The missionary efforts in Africa and the local areas promoted spiritual and physical nurture, while the establishment of schools provided opportunities for enlightenment and advancement. Across denominations, institutions of higher learning such as Wilberforce in Ohio, 1856; Morris Brown, Atlanta, Georgia, 1885; Livingston College, North Carolina, 1889; Selma University, Alabama, 1879; and State University, Louisville, Kentucky, 1873 were established. Many of these institutions are surviving today despite years of financial challenges (DuBois, 2003; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Mitchell, 2004; Nelsen et al., 1971).

The Black Church’s outreach included serving as a newspaper, a principal forum for Black expression, an oratory school, and welfare agency (Best, 1998; Billingsley, 1999; DuBois, 2003). Whether in an exchange of five dollars from a Mother in the church to a young college student, or a larger contribution from the collective church to support a local small businessman, the Black community has depended on the resources of its church. The Black Church has played a vital role in many historical movements, most notable the Civil Rights Movement. It has shaped public policy: regarding the Free African Society in 1787 (FAS) and Niagara Movement in 1905. The FAS was organized as a non-denominational religious mutual aid society for Blacks. The FAS efforts of Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and a few others eventually led to the establishment of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the first independent Black denomination. Likewise, the Niagara Movement which was founded by a group of Black males led by W. E. B Du Bois, John Hope, and William M. Trotter served as one of the early civil rights organizations. The movement sought civil liberties, eradication of racism, and human
recognition for Blacks. Most important, the Black Church has cultivated and nurtured political activists, leaders, and volunteers who have served as gigantic change agents (DuBois, 2003; Haight, 2002; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Nelsen & Nelsen, 1975).

Black pastors have long admonished their members to take part in radical events such as boycotts. Black preachers have been sought out by public and private decision-makers to influence the community. Some ministers have assumed an active official political role, while others have worked via the institutional structure of the church to achieve goals (Best, 1998; Hamilton, 1972). Research has shown the depth of social and political involvement differs significantly across denominations and geographical regions (Best, 1998; Billingsley, 1999; DuBois, 2003; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

Dr. Robert Franklin, president of the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC), indicated Black Churches help to transform Black communities by forming political agendas leading to significant change (Starling, 1999). In the South, prominent African American pastors, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Hosea Williams, Joseph Lowery, Andrew Young, and William Holmes Borders of Wheat Street Baptist Church have used their influence to engage elected officials (Newman, 2003).

The role of the Black clergy has also been one of mobilization and dissemination of information concerning political candidates and current issues (Best, 1998; Billingsley, 1999; Newman, 2003). This has been demonstrated in no place greater than it has in Atlanta, Georgia where the Black clergy has been instrumental in propelling Black candidates into office. During the past three decades a vast majority of the city’s elected officials, at various executive levels including the Mayoral level have been African Americans (Newman, 2003). The African
American political power amassed in Atlanta lead the Black clergy in Atlanta and surrounding areas to turn their attention toward economic empowerment in the Black community.

During the Civil Rights Movement the Black Church manifested much political and economic power. Black leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Adam Clayton Powell, and Andrew Young coalesced the attention of the Black community and media alike (Best, 1998; Nelsen et al., 1971). Focusing on economic empowerment, the Black Church has been able to extend its social function to embrace more comprehensive community development, which includes real estate investments, business acquisitions, and health-care services (Smith, 2003; Starling, 1999).

Despite its historical successes in influencing social policy, the contemporary Black Church still has much work to do regarding health challenges such as STDs’ HIV/AIDS of its community (Fullilove, 2001; Smith, 2004; Starling, 1999). The church continues to struggle with ways in which to discuss sexual issues that are adversely affecting the lives of a large majority of the Black community. At best it appears the church’s health care efforts basically include food distribution, annual screenings, and pamphlet distribution, although there are a few exceptions (Frederick, 2003; Mukenge, 1983; Nelsen et al., 1971).

The Black Church’s Agenda & Sexuality

It is clear that issues seen as important and consistently articulated by the Black Church become salient to its membership. The Black Church has a current opportunity regarding sexuality concerns. Many people call for the Black Church to aggressively attack the issue of high risk sexual behavior (Coyne-Beasley & Schoenbach, 2000; Fullilove, 2001; Fullilove & Fullilove, 1998). The contemporary Black Church has been criticized for its silence regarding sexual health challenges (Smiley, 2003; Smith, 2003). The Black Church has historically served
as the arena for discursive engagement of social challenges that impede Black empowerment. Hallahan (2001) contend discursive engagements are restricted until an issue becomes a shared problem that is analyzed and defined through communicative processes. Thus, the problems of adolescent sexual risk behavior can be viewed as a consequence of the Black experience in America, which is therefore a socially constructed issue open to analysis, definition and deliberation. Because of the church’s reluctance to open its door to healthy sexuality discussions, criticism abounds.

Many have challenged the Black Church’s heteronormative perception of sexuality by calling to fore the universal tenets and categorizations that do not recognize the multiple identities and interests of its congregants (Dyson, 2004; Fullilove, 2001; King & Hunter, 2004; Stephens & Phillips, 2003; West, 1999). Heteronormativity in the Black Church refers to the promotion of appropriate ideals of behaviors, social relations and sexuality. There are social perceptions linked to the Black Church that define practices and behaviors that are acceptable and unacceptable. When heteronormative and pathological perspectives are associated with sexuality individuals are routinely marginalized, face erasure, and exclusion in both the Black Church and community (Dyson, 2004; Hammonds, 1997; Hill-Collins, 2004; King & Hunter, 2004).

Specifically, the Black Church has endured criticism for its failure to utilize its power to give voice and attention to issues such as the reproductive rights of Black women, services to those living with HIV/AIDS, homosexuality, and disparities challenging African American youths (Frederick, 2003; Fullilove, 2001; Nelsen et al., 1971; Richardson, 1999; Smiley, 2003; Smith, 2004). For some, the contemporary Black Church is seen as a ‘corporation’ rather than functioning as an institution of social service. According to R. Drew Smith (2004), we have yet
to witness the utility of the time, energy, and resources by the Black Church to combat the crippling devastation of current challenges facing Black America. The Kaiser Family Foundation Survey of African Americans on HIV/AIDS found that African Americans are seeking solutions and assistance with base level challenges facing the community: how to talk to youth and partners about HIV/AIDS; where and how to seek testing; what are treatment options for sexually transmitted diseases. Despite the widespread concerns and unrest about sexuality issues little response from social institutions including the Black Church has occurred (Smiley, 2004; www.cdc.gov).

The Black Church is a powerful institution through which sexual health interventions can be implemented, and a tremendous platform where erroneous myths associated with HIV/AIDS can be eradicated. However, there has been a problem getting Black leadership to embrace health issues as part of their congregational mission. According to Dr. Miller (personal communication, November 10, 2005), “It is not enough that only a sporadic number of progressive churches are answering the call.” The twenty-first century Black Church must expand its outreach programming and take part in collaborations with social service and governmental agencies health research (Coyne-Beasley & Schoenbach, 2000; DeHaven et al., 2004; Fullilove & Fullilove, 1998). Individuals involved with church activities generally take on the beliefs, attitudes and values of religious institutions. For this reason many researchers are interested in how pastors in Southern Black Churches perceive health issues and other concerns facing Black America (Freeman, 1986; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Owens, 2000; Smith, 2003).

Creating protest by generating tension and arresting public attention for promoting social change is viewed as fragile remnants or long forgotten lessons for many Black leaders today (Best, 1998; Smiley, 2003). Homosexuality, reproductive rights, and HIV/AIDS concerns have
both paralyzed and silenced Black Church leadership (Best, 1998; Hamilton, 1972; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Smiley, 2001). Silence and immobilism does not negate the realities or struggles associated with sexuality in the Black Community. J. L. King (2004) contends the silence of the church only serves to perpetuate at risk sexual behaviors and places more African American lives at risk. Breaking the silence surrounding sexual issues is a critical public health challenge facing the Black Church. Dr. Newsome, Dean of Howard University’s Divinity School, says “…It takes a village to raise a child. I firmly believe it takes a Church to raise a people…. we have to be very intentional about raising a race of people to live in a spiritually healthy way.” Growing spiritual, social, and health challenges will eventually force the Black Church to adjust its mission to meet the increasing need of its members, particularly its youth population (Billingsley, 1999; Frederick, 2003; Richardson, 1999; Smiley, 2001).

Black sexuality is a complex socially constructed issue that emerged out of the Black experience in colonial America (Dyson, 2004; Hill Collins, 2001; West, 1999). The premise of Black sexuality should be the base level of topic engagement in scholastic and social arenas. Black bodies are still considered commodities bathed in imagery that dehumanizes the individual. The depictions of Black sexuality were birthed out of the collaboration between White Christianity and slavery. According to Dyson (2004), “Black women were thought to be hot and ready to be bothered. Black men were believed to have big sexual desires and even bigger organs to realize their lust” (p.224). In an attempt to refute the myth of Black sexuality the Black Church took on a conservative perspective of sexuality that perpetuates a somewhat enslaved mentality regarding sexuality (Hammonds, 1997). Hortense Spillers (1987) discuss the ways in which genealogies associated with the Black experience highlight the dialectic tensions of residing in a free yet arresting culture. From the perspective of the Black Church, its
leadership has the opportunity to revisit the ways in which sexuality influences adolescents self perceptions that guide the behaviors challenging the community.

The Black Church’s Health Agenda

As far back as 1896, the Black Church has convened to focus on health problems of the Black community. Historically, limited or no access to health care or medical facilities has generated great discontent in the Black community. The Black public sphere has and continues to be a potential space for engagement of health challenges, though many posit this engagement is limited or void when it comes to the current sexual health crisis (DeHaven et al., 2004; Frederick, 2003; Fullilove & Fullilove, 1998). Health crusades were some of the first initiatives the Black Church supported in order to address basic health concerns of the Black community. In limited instances hospitals were established and supported by church bodies (DuBois, 2003; Nelsen & Nelsen, 1975).

During the slave era the loosely formed church organizations were the primary means through which enslaved individuals received health care (Billingsley, 1999; DuBois, 2003; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). The network of the Underground Railroad system was linked to the underground church bodies formed by slaves. If slaves encountered injuries on their journey to freedom they were able to find solace and traditional homeopathic care via the underground networks (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Mitchell, 2004; Nelsen et al., 1971). Because slaves were considered little more than property, health care was not a central concern of their slave master. This left the health care of the enslaved community to be assumed by those within that community (DuBois, 2003; Sherman, 2000). Some scholars suggest that slavery was a distinct period of religious and medical province that produced the beginning of natural remedies and
midwifery. In addition, practices of self-help agency manifested with the slave trade (DuBois, 2003; Nelsen et al., 1971).

More recently, various health organizations have sought collaborations with Black Churches in an effort to combat diseases that are prevalent within the Black community. For example, the American Diabetes Association united with the Congress of National Black Churches to help campaign against the diabetes epidemic through a program called Diabetes Sunday. Diabetes Sunday was established by the Association's African American Program to generate dialogue utilizing the pulpit of Black Churches. In 1996 there were initially 200 churches participating in the project, since that time that total has grown to more than 2,000. The goal of the program was to combat diabetes church by church. According to reports the results have been described as “nothing short of miraculous” (Gavin, 2000).

Similar efforts were implemented by the American Heart Association, and various cancer associations. Health care officials and social service agencies have participated in forums within Black congregations to promote better health practices. These forums have included preventive measures, screenings, and informational sessions. Religious and political leaders have been asked to exercise their power of influence to speak on health topics, admonishing their public to take better care of themselves and those at risk to get checked by a health-care professional (Gavin, 2000; Holmes, 2004; Smiley, 2001).

Spirituality and religion are crucial aspects of Black society. The Black Church has provided cultural and social resources for Blacks which were not provided via others means or institutions. It is also in the confines of the Black Church that many have established a sense of belonging, self worth, and identity. Previous research and this study suggest that the polity of the Black Church can help meet the social and health needs of the community. Historically the
church has assumed the responsibility of eradicating injustices, empowering individuals, and
developing the community. Therefore, there is a need to explore the current agenda of the Black
Church, to discover its immediate capacity to serve as an agent of social change.
CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

There has been a great thrust of discussion surrounding the Black Church agenda. Several forums have convened to examine what the Black Church is really doing in relation to the surmounting challenges facing Black society. Considering the numerous challenges facing the Black Church, the agenda setting theory allows us to explore how specific challenges are advanced while other critical concerns are not. In this chapter we consider not only the process of agenda setting but the salience of decision-makers as well as actor and issue prominence. It is necessary to discuss a few of the basic premises of agenda setting theory set forth in previous literature. What follows is a brief discussion of agenda setting research.

Agenda setting is a theory that explains the process that causes certain issues to emerge and gain prominence in the media, legislatures and the public, while other issues achieve minimal to no attention at all (Cobb & Elder, 1983; Salmon, Post & Christensen, 2003; Soroka, 2002; Wasieleski, 2001). Researchers from various disciplines have sought to explain why certain controversial issues propel more quickly as public concerns while other more substantial issues are relegated to fleeting public thoughts. Studies have been conducted by political scientists, sociologists, communication scholars, and public health researchers. Their focus has been to determine how media gatekeepers, political leaders, and other influential individuals generate attention toward particular social problems. The vast majority of results suggest that influential individuals and organizations possess enormous skill and power resources that enable them to assume strategic positions in shaping the public agenda (Cobb & Elder, 1983; Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Norris, Kern & Just, 2003; Salmon, Post & Christensen, 2003; Soroka, 2002).
In the agenda setting process, it is vitally important to redefine and reframe initiatives and strategies in a manner that instigates the public to embrace highlighted issue. This process begins by reviving and creating an appreciation for the value of individual and social accountability in the processes of eradicating adolescent sexual risk-taking behavior. The essence of framing involves prioritizing certain facts, images, or developments over others.

According to Salmon, Post and Christen (2003), issue saliency which refers to the perceived importance of one issue in relation to others collectively comprising a public, policy or media agenda, is the common thread among most agenda setting methods. A primary focus in agenda setting research has been the degree in which the press’s, social institutions’, and other organizations’ worldview and gets transferred to their constituents. Based on the success of the aforementioned health campaigns within the Black Church, greater efforts could be directed toward similar sexual health campaigns. Alliances between health agencies and the Black Church provide some indication that mobilizing the public will toward social change regarding salient health concerns is a viable and salient agenda issue.

Social networks such as the Black Church and its community have rich possibilities of enhancing the outcomes of sexual health campaigns through: (1) communication and education; (2) influence and power; (3) credentials and networking; and (4) reinforcing awareness (Coyne-Beasley & Schoenbach, 2000; Dilulio, 1998; Gavin, 2000; Salmon, Post, & Christen, 2003). In previous literature, the church is identified as a community institution and mechanism that has the potential to effect social change (DuBois, 2003; Holmes, 2004; Johnson, 2001; Rubin, Billingsley, & Caldwell, 1994; Sherman, 2000). Salmon, Post, and Christen (2003) aptly stated, “Communities affect people’s ideology. Individuals tend to go along with the public will when they are invested. Examples of community organizations where members are invested would be
churches, neighborhoods, and door-to-door campaigns” (p. 20). The subjectivity component in agenda setting references the intentional defining and redefining of an issue, such that the issue becomes attractive enough to gain access from gatekeepers. Gatekeepers are the individuals, institutions, and groups whose actions determine the success or failure of a demand or issue advancing onto an agenda (Cobb & Elder, 1983; Wasieleski, 2001).

In the agenda setting process issue expansion is the second step after issue creation. Support must be mobilized by advocates in order to promote an issue to an institutional agenda. Public awareness and support increases the probability of agenda access (Cobb & Elder, 1983; Wasieleski, 2001). Wasieleski (2001) identifies five fundamental dimensions that are required in agenda setting processes. The first dimension refers to the degree of definition and concreteness associated with an issue. The second references the salience of the issue to the public. The third dimension addresses the timeliness of issue. Complexity and categorical precedence are the fourth and fifth dimensions respectively. Each of the five dimensions influence issue expansion in various ways that will generate awareness and issue placement.

From a general systems approach, Cobb and Elder (1983) incorporated the works of David Easton, in discussing how demands are generated from wants via a politicization process gain, which attention and claim placement on decision-makers agenda. This politicization process takes place only when decision-makers deem the status of a demand to be serious and attractive. The conversion of a demand into an issue makes the demand more attractive and powerful enough to gain access on the political agenda, thus propelling individuals to action (Cobb & Elder, 1983; Wasieleski, 2001). The relational power concept in agenda setting suggests that one individual has the ability to affect, manipulate or change the actions of another. This ability can result from situational or contextual factors. Power is the means through which
information is controlled, and regulates what will or will not be exposed via decision-makers (Cobb & Elder, 1983; Wasieleski, 2001). It is within the aforementioned concept of power that Black Church leadership most effectively exercises its ability to influence behaviors (DuBois, 2003; Mukenge, 1983; Nelsen et al., 1971).

Fredrik Engelstad (2000) provides an assessment of theories of power that includes definitions of the various forms of power generally exercised by religious leaders. Power concepts and the communicative process are interconnected links to the ways in which individuals view the world. According to Engelstad, a simplified definition of power is the ability to use one's agency to get an actor to do something he/she would not have done otherwise. We acknowledge the various complexities associated with theorizing power and communication. For the purpose of this study, power relations in the structure of narratives are essential. Religious leaders construct their message with the expressed intent of influencing audience members by using power to manipulate their interpretative processes. Legitimate power and other factors such as charisma, and resource dependency, underline the communicative acts that occur in most social institution relationships (Cobb, Ross, & Ross, 1976; Engelstad, 2000; Wasieleski, 2001). When we consider the relationship between the pastor and congregants, it is usually congregants’ loyalty that produces conformity.

For example, Bishop T. D. Jakes, Dr. Creflo Dollar, Bishop Eddie Long, and other preeminent ministerial Black leaders regulate the behaviors of their constituents through discursive mediums. These discursive mediums are endowments forged by the power, control, and status amassed via their pulpit. The complex nature of the Black Church forces one to simultaneously examine the inherent power relation of the church as a social system and that of its ministers. The preacher becomes a powerful entity first from the support given by his/her
congregation and secondly, by his/her community. The power and control that Black ministerial leaders wield is significant. Their ability to formulate and manipulate thoughts, perceptions, and subsequently behaviors is unquestionable (Best, 1998; DuBois, 2003; Hamilton, 1972; Mukenge, 1983; Mumby, 1992).

Issues that obtain access onto an institutional agenda of organizations like the Black Church are items perceived by decision-makers (ministerial leaders) as meriting serious consideration. The issue must consist of at least the following three factors: be explicit, be active, and be serious. The difference between systemic and institutional agendas is that a systematic agenda is general and simply identifies a problem, an institutional agenda is rather specific (Cobb & Elder, 1983). No issue will advance to either the systemic or institutional agenda without the express consent of gatekeepers or decision-makers.

A collective diverse plan of action is required to eradicate the complex issue of minority adolescent sexual high-risk taking behaviors. Minority sexual high-risk behaviors entail sexual practices that lead to sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS such as unprotected sex and intercourse with multiple partners (protected and unprotected). Building an agenda that addresses minority sexual behavior entails a long-term commitment of continued efforts to access and persuade powerbrokers and a global public. The Black Church could frame its agenda in terms of the adverse consequences of minority adolescent sexual behavior. However, a different approach would be to emphasize the need for collective efforts in educational enlightenment, and health services.

Norris, Kern and Just (2003) indicate that news frames compile key concepts of an issue to reinforce a particular interpretation, or emphasize certain implications. The framing choices are often strategically structured to reinforce or seduce an audience into accepting a particular
ideology. The Black Church provides a social context in which ideologies develop. Congregants and constituents of the Black Church can be considered social subjects whose ideas and sense-making are shaped by the discursive practices by ministerial leaders.

**Influencing Youth Behavior**

Given the inhibitions on providing adolescent sex education and the increasing number of adolescents engaging in sexual activities, health agencies have aggressively sought diverse forums through which adolescents can access information about health relationships and sexual behavior (Coyne-Beasley & Schoenbach, 2000; DeHaven et al., 2004; Dilulio, 1998; Satcher, 2001). Adolescents need opportunities to learn about consequences of high-risk behaviors, disease prevention, and safe sexual practices including contraception and birth control issues that parents often have difficulty discussing (Ball, Armistead, & Austin, 2003; Green & Sollie, 1989). The church has been identified as an influential forum for implementing effective sex education programming (Coyne-Beasley & Schoenbach, 2000; DeHaven et al., 2004).

Several researchers have suggested that social institutions play a significant role in adolescents’ decisions to delay sexual initiations and transform risk-taking behaviors (Coyne-Beasley & Schoenbach, 2000; Meier, 2003; Rostosky, Wilcox, Wright & Randall, 2004; Rubin, Billingsley & Caldwell, 1994; Upchurch, Levy-Storms, Sucoff & Aneshensel, 1998). Generally, researchers also suggest that adolescent sex education is the principal goal of most research pertaining to minority adolescent sexual behavior and communication. Findings from multiple studies pertaining to the promotion of sexuality issues within the confines of religious organizations suggest there remain a significant number of muted Black Churches across denominations (Billingsley, 1999; Frederick, 2003; Fullilove, 2001; Smith, 2004).
As a social institution the Black Church has historically recognized the need to shape its message of God and salvation within the context of the lived experience of the community, but fails to extend that message to embrace relevant challenges (Barnes, 2004; Du Bois, 2003; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; McCall, 1986; Mukenge, 1983). Additionally, the work of the church has always depended upon, in various degrees, the collaboration of other agencies. Accordingly several advocates and agencies have called upon African American religious leaders to join in the effort to eradicate the overwhelming health concerns that are plaguing the minority adolescent population. The following statement extracted from material posted on The Reentry National Media Outreach Campaign website suggests that Black leaders have the potential to impact their community:

According to the National Religious Affairs Association (NRAA) of NABCJ, “Research through public opinion surveys conducted with over 1,000 African American pastors, clergy, and laypersons of all faiths overwhelmingly agree that culturally competent training backed by adequate resources and a greater understanding of the issues, needs, and public policy would strengthen the church's ability ‘on-the-ground' to serve its constituents. Black preachers and leaders are in the best position to emphasize and convey this point on behalf of those over whom they have authority.”

If the Black Church has the power to set the health agenda for its youth, is it performing this role?

Freeman (1986) found that the church made the greatest contribution to shifts in African American male youth behaviors. Freeman’s findings were the result of conducting one hour interviews with African American male teenagers from inner-city communities. His results indicate that teenagers who attended church at least once a week were less stressed and less
prone to psychological problems than a comparison group of non-church attending youths. It was also noted that the majority of youths affiliated with a church were the product of a secure familial relationship, often consisting of both parents residing in the household. The youth data from Freeman’s study indicates the multipurpose central role of the church in defining and shaping their existence. The familial nurture of African American youth has traditionally taken place in an extended nexus that includes relatives, friends, and religious leaders (DuBois, 2003; Haight, 2002; Mukenge, 1983). The Black Church has served as the central means through which kinship networks fulfilled its responsibilities to rear healthy and productive youth (Haight, 2002; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

Brachear (2005) asserts that the recent agenda for the Black Church has focused on schools, jobs, and health care. However, the general treatment of health care keeps church leadership away from specifics topics such as adolescent sexual risk-taking behavior. Church leadership has debated the position to be taken and communicated to its youth regarding sexual practice. The moral principle of abstinence has been pitted against the position of education for healthy and safe sexual behavior (Ball, 2003; Coyne-Beasley & Schoenbach, 2000; Meier, 2003; Rubin et al., 1994). In the case of the Black Church, reinforcement of abstinence strategies is the primary communicative agenda. Many have criticized an abstinence message as a non-constructive absolute position (Anderson, 2000; Chapin, 2001; Coyne-Beasley & Schoenbach, 2000).

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation’s website, there is a lack of evidence to support beliefs that abstinence-only education delays teenage sexual activities. Comprehensive sex education opponents feel this approach sends conflicting messages to youth by providing safe practice information (Anderson; 2000; Donahue & Benson, 1995; Gable, 2005;
Though the value conflicts of the church are on-going concerns for many scholars, several contend the Black Church has the potential to be a tremendous agent of change for adolescent sexual behavior (Coyne-Beasley & Schoenbach, 2000; Green & Sollie, 1989). Scales & Kirby (1981) cited in Green & Sollie (1989) suggest non-school programs provide more diversity of role models for sexuality discussions, which is why many continue to challenge churches’ abstinence-only sex education programs. National and state surveys show that millions of teenagers are sexually active. Teens are engaging in risky sexual behaviors without the benefit of adequate sexuality education, which should be a concern of ministerial leaders (Brown & Steele, 1995; Fullilove, 2001; Gable, 2005).

**Environmental Factors & Adolescent Risk Behaviors**

Generally it is difficult to attempt any investigation of adolescent sexuality without addressing contributing factors which include the lack of employment, recreation, and extracurricular activities (Fullilove, 2001; Fullilove & Fullilove, 1998). The scarcities encountered by the youths are often the result of socioeconomic constraints impeding their family structure (Cook, 2000; Crosby et al., 2002). Often times, the decision-making processes of adolescents residing in rural and inner-city neighbors are negatively influenced by familial instability and deprivation. However, the church has served as a stabilizing agent for many of the youths in their community, including those who are affiliated by formal membership in addition to those affiliated via informal relationships (i.e. outreach) (DeHaven et al., 2004; Freeman, 1986; Haight, 2002; Parker, 2003). Social, recreation and educational initiatives sponsored by the Black Church promote a sense of community for youths and enhance self worth. For these reasons, the religious activities of youths can not be ignored or viewed as marginal in research endeavors (Cook, 2000; Ream, 2003).
Poverty is one of the more noted environmental factors influencing adolescent risk behavior. According to the Georgia Department of Human Resources, Georgia is one of 16 states with an African American population over 1 million. The 1999 median income for household income for African Americans is reported to be $27,910. Environmental factors such as lack of familial support, mass media, residential disparities, and discrimination have been identified as great stressors for youths (Haight, 2002; Johnson, 2001; Rubin, Billingsley, & Caldwell, 1994). Freeman (1986) proposes a positive correlation between church involvement and the way African Americans spend their time in more productive rather than deviant behaviors. The church helps youth to develop resilience to inner-city life stressors by providing mentors, developing their self-identity, and providing security and stability via relationship with powerful others (Cook, 2000).

The mass media has served as a contributor to adolescent risk behavior. Television and music in particular consistently depict sexuality in a very irresponsible fashion (Brown, 2002; Chapin, 2000). As Brown (2002) implies the mass media seldom incorporate responsible sexual behaviors (commitment, contraceptives, and consideration of consequences) despite the growing concerns of risking sexual activity. One has to consider the influence of media when studies begin to show that adolescents spend upwards of 7 plus hours a day with some form of media (Brown & Steele, 1995; Chapin, 2000). Too often, adolescents are placed in positions where they spend more time with the television, sexually explicit videos, video games and music than participating in constructive wholesome activities (Chapin, 2000; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999).

Multiple reports including the Kaiser Family Foundation contend youth are attracted to mass media with sexual content. Because of the tremendous amount of sexual content in television programming, the likelihood of adolescent exposure increases greatly. Approximately
66% of prime time shows contain some sexual content, 62% of scenes in television shows include some sexual behavior, and 28% of the scenes placed significant emphasis on sex. Each year it appears television programming continues to become more sexual explicit than the previous year.

Mass media influence the sexual choices adolescents make (Brown, 2002; Brown & Steele, 1995; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). Many in the Black community have expressed great concern regarding the influence of mass media and adolescents (Dyson, 2004; Smiley, 2001 & 2003; West, 1999). The image of African Americans is often distorted by mass media portrayals, and often misrepresents the African American experience (Freeman, 1986; Haight, 2002; Smiley, 2003). Scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, Hortense Spillers, Michael E. Dyson, and Cornel West contend that mass media representations perpetuate risky sexual behavior of Black adolescents. These images can manifest the self-fulfilling prophecies associated with hypersexuality and other negative beliefs related to Black sexuality. The chief concern of mass media is attracting a larger audience and increasing profit margins (Brown & Steele, 1995; Haight, 2002; Kotchick et al., 1999; Steinman & Zimmerman, 2004).

Brown (2002) suggests the mass media is a vital resource for influencing youth sexual beliefs and behaviors. Brown’s findings indicate youth spend six to seven hours daily with some form of media, particularly televisions with cable access that are located in their bedrooms (Anonymous, 2001; Brown & Steele, 1995; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). Prime-time television presents premarital and extramarital sex as inconsequential behaviors. Adolescents’ exposure to media introduces them to sexual scripts which might not have been observed via other means. These scripts sometimes numb adolescents to messages and practices of preventative and protective sexual engagements (Chapin, 2000; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). On the other hand,
information obtained from various surveys show 50% of youth learn to negotiate and engage safe sexual practices (Brown, 2002; Brown & Steele, 1995; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005, 2006; YRBSS).

Adolescents attend and interpret messages differently based on currently advanced frames, and strategies employed by organizations. The storytelling aspect of the Black Church is a viable means by which the church constructs frames that promote religious tenets for adolescents (DuBois, 2003; Frederick, 2003; Haight, 2002). The strategic art of storytelling is a purposive, influential, and precise communicative act that has been used for centuries to arrest adolescents’ attention. It increases the saliency of a particular frame and sustains awareness (Frederick, 2003; Langellier & Peterson, 1993). The Black Church is a unique, yet distinct institution possessing the ability to get African Americans thinking and discussing sexuality beyond the safe topics of wayward paths (Haight, 2002; Jones, 1979). The storytelling practice of the Black Church provides reference points about what is crucial, in addition to framing perceptions about good and bad as well as spiritual and cultural appropriateness for its body.

Communicative Polity in the Black Church

Communication is more than the message exchange; it is a process of defining political practice. Much of what occurs during the communicative acts between ministers and their public is the establishment of shared assumptions. If we view the Black Church as a system we can better appreciate its ability to negotiate the self-regulating function of its public thought processes (Anderson, 2000; Clegg, 1993; Mohan, 1993). Negotiating individuals’ thought processes coordinates with the ability to transform behavior. This transformation can be traced back to the discursive power of the ministers.
Mumby (1988) opens a channel for examining the agency of the Black Church in establishing meaning for its constituents via its agenda. Similarly, the agency of the Black preacher is achieved by virtue of his/her elevated position in the Black Church. The congregants vis-à-vis social actors of the Black Church are not only individuals affiliated by membership but those non-members alike. Thus, the agency of the church and preacher reaches beyond the walls of the sanctuary, it extends to the community. Sunday morning services, Bible Study, and other worship events provide the space wherein the preacher exercises his/her agency by perpetuating hegemonic concepts in the form of sermonic narratives. These narratives are structured to influence or dictate behavioral practices of the social actors (Clegg, 1993; Engelstad, 2000; Mumby, 1987). According to interview responses and participant observations, congregants’ parroting of the minister’s ideologies and messages is a common occurrence within the Black public sphere. When asked how the minister’s message influences their live choices, parishioners often indicate their desire is “to do what the Pastor says to do.” This pattern of compliance reinforces the Black Church’s social role as a potential forum for influencing adolescent behavior (Cook, 2000; Coyne-Beasley & Schoenbach, 2000; Donahue & Benson, 1995).

Communication scholars have suggested that within organizational communication, power and ideology are crucial factors that should be noted in framing a particular set of assumptions for an audience (Baker, 2002; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996; Mumby, 1987). Leaders of organizations including cultural and social institutions wield a tremendous amount of power in shaping a sense of reality for others. It is through intentional efforts that leaders invoke their power to construct ideologies that influence the manner in which others make sense of the world (Du Bois, 2003; Engelstad, 2000; Mumby, 1987; Youngblood & Winn, 2004). It is important to
acknowledge the role of power in the framing/agenda-setting process because of its direct relationship to interpretation. Individual compliance or persuasion can be traced to a reciprocal relationship that exists between power and interpretation (Brown, 2002; Engelstad, 2000; Mumby, 1987).

Leaders construct frames in order to manipulate the thought process of others into alignment with what is often their hegemonic world view. A deliberate effort is taken in leaders’ exercise of ‘inherent’ power to draw their audience to a similar interpretation of values, beliefs, and behaviors (Brown, 2002; Engelstad, 2000). From an interpretative aspect, the Black ministry leader integrates his/her messages and daily interactions in a manner that outlines a distinct cultural, spiritual, and social understanding that may draw his/her audience into alignment.

Based on Clegg’s (1993) theoretical overview, several factors should be emphasized when discussing the power constructs within the Black Church. The biblical teachings, governing covenants, and religious polity are factors that fosters the production of organizational obedience within the Black Church (DuBois, 2003; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Mukenge, 1983). The recitation of Preambles and Covenants during worship services also reinforces behavioral norms. Many Baptist churches in Georgia visually and orally emphasize behavior as exemplified in the sample covenant:

“We also engage to maintain family and secret devotion; to religiously educate our children; to seek salvation of our kindred and acquaintances; to walk circumspectly in the world; to be just in our dealings, faithful in our engagements, and exemplary in our deportment; to avoid all tattling, backbiting, and excessive anger; to abstain from the sale
and use of intoxicating drink as a beverage, and to be zealous in our efforts to advance the kingdom of our Saviour.”

Additionally, the previously mentioned factors constitute Black Church culture as well as reflect modes by which organizational sense-making and meaning formation manifests. In this way power functions as a primary form of imposing rationality for congregants. It is through communicative acts that ministers forward claims that are framed and supported by biblical doctrines. Congregants’ basic acceptance of these claims can be attributed to traditions, customs, faith, spiritual experience, and ministerial authority (Mukenge, 1983; Woodson, 1945). The purpose of covenants and other articles of faith is to explicate the ideological context of the church, its internal distribution of power and the rights and responsibilities of the body. Although discursive acts are an essential factor in relations of power, they generate great resistance and disagreement. The debates surrounding the relevance and effectiveness of abstinence pledges demonstrates the resistance and disagreement that will emerge as a result of discursive processes.

Bruckner & Bearman (2005) suggest those adolescents who sign abstinence pledges are more likely to engage risky sexual behaviors. Their report indicated that adolescents who pledge abstinence until marriage are more likely to have oral and anal sex than adolescents who have not had intercourse. In addition, those adolescents who pledge abstinence were more likely not to use condoms, particularly during the initiation of intercourse placing themselves at greater risk of STDs. Similarly, Ceci Connolly, staff reporter for the Washington Post, reported the release of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health results has generated a great deal of controversy regarding the interpretation of the data as it pertains to abstinence. Her report referenced several scholars including Joe S. McIlhaney, Jr., chairman of the Medical Institute for
Sexual Health, who suggests the data provides an incomplete picture of abstinence pledges. Though abstinence-only programs are generating much debate, one can not ignore the power relations that underpin efforts such as federal “Abstinence-only” campaigns or other virginity groups. Virginity groups such as “True Love Waits,” consist of over 2½ million adolescents and college students across the globe who have committed to abstinence pledges.

Considering the historical traditions of the Black Church in shaping social policy and congregational behavior, this research questions whether the Black church continues to serves as the sacred sanctuary for the Black community. Has the Black Church retained its ability to reshape ideologies and positively influence behavioral practices? In particular, does the church’s leadership possess the power, resources, and influence to redirect the sexual risk-taking behavior of its adolescent population?
CHAPTER 3

PURPOSE AND METHODS

The purpose of this study is to explore the agenda-setting process of the Black Church relative to adolescent sex behavior. Specifically, this study will examine the agenda-setting role of selected Black Churches in Dougherty County, Georgia. This study is unique in its focus on the agenda-setting function of the Southern Black Church, as that agenda relates to adolescent high-risk sexual behavior.

Concentrating on the Southern Black church is critical due to the alarming statistics pertaining to minority adolescents in the Southern region (Ball et al., 2003; Coyne-Beasley & Schoenbach, 2000; Keith et al., 1991; www.cdc.gov). Startling facts and previous research findings pertaining to Southern African American adolescent high-risk sexual behavior warrant further investigation of this phenomenon.

The Southwest (Albany) Health District is a 14 county regional composition that includes Dougherty County. In 1997, over 10,000 Georgia teens ages 10-17 became pregnant, of which 800 were under 15 years old. According to the Georgia Division of Public Health, 2004 statistical data for African American adolescents: there were 130 pregnancies for girls ages 10-19 Years; and 239 live births to unmarried females Ages: 10-19 Years. In 1998, more than 16,500 Georgia teens ages 10-19 were diagnosed with STDs. The medical costs, complications, and number of cases of STDs, and HIV/AIDS in Dougherty County, Georgia continue to escalate.

This research examines the role the Southern Black Church plays in influencing minority adolescent sexual behaviors in this setting. Specifically, we seek to understand how determinations are made about which issues are to be promoted as critical initiatives, particularly for youth ministry? Who orchestrates the framing of specific issues regarding adolescents?
Additionally, what are the sexual, religious, and social implications behind building an agenda addressing adolescent sexual behavior? Previously, researchers have utilized the agenda-setting model to study a variety of health-related issues, including AIDS, drugs, cancer and tobacco farming (Salmon, Post & Christen, 2003; Wilensky, 2003). Thus agenda-setting could serve as a framework for analyzing the Black Church’s discourse regarding adolescent high-risk sexual behavior.

**Research Questions**

This study will apply the agenda-setting theory to analyze the responses of ministerial leaders of Southern Black Churches to the phenomena of minority adolescent sexual high-risk behaviors. The qualitative descriptive analysis will be based on interview data collected from ministerial leaders associated with Black Churches in a Southwest Georgia rural county. Three primary research questions are posed to examine the church’s communicative agenda related to adolescent sexual risk-taking behavior.

RQ1: Who are the gatekeepers of the Southern Black Church’s agenda?

RQ2: What are ministry leaders’ perceptions of adolescent sex education?

RQ3: How do ministry leaders evaluate the usefulness and relevance of their church’s agenda regarding adolescent sex education?

**METHOD**

There have been only a few studies that examined the Black Church’s response to minority sexual risk-taking behavior (Coyne-Beasley & Schoenbach, 2000; Fullilove & Fullilove, 1998; Gamble, 2005). The Black Church has traditionally served as a key social institution in the Black community providing resources for its constituents. This study seeks to examine the role of the Black Church in transforming youth sexual risk behaviors in the South.
Triangulation of methods, including in-depth interviews, written surveys, and ethnographic techniques were used to answer the research questions.

Qualitative methods provide a wide range of social interaction analysis, including verbal and non-verbal behavior. Ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews are vital data collections techniques (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000; Griffin, 2003). Ethnography is a qualitative method used to describe a culture; culture typically refers to the origins, values, roles and material items associated with a specific group of people (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000; Griffin, 2003; Oliffe, 2005). An ethnographic approach to this study was critical because of my ongoing lived experience and extensive familiarity with the cultural and organizational space of the Southern Black Church. I not only theorize and analyze this cultural and organizational space, but analyze myself in relation to this space.

Ethnography has been used in health care, social science, and anthropogenic research to describe patients’ and particular ethnic groups’ cultures in specific context (Freeman, 1986; Fullilove, 2001; Johnson, 2002; Oliffe, 2005). It is a significant tool for examining the everyday or ritual practices of groups or organizations, including the Black Church. In regards to the Black Church ethnography provides a means by which researchers can explicate the ways religious and cultural beliefs influence behavioral outcomes.

Setting

Dougherty, County is situated in Southwest Georgia, within 188 miles South of Atlanta. According to 2004 census data, Dougherty County estimated population: 95,681; Racial composition: Black 57,762; White Non-Hispanic 36,315; Other 1604; Median resident age: 31.1 years; Median household income: $28,639, (24.8% of the population income is below poverty level). There are an estimated 150 Black Churches in Dougherty County. There are storefronts,
home based, and churches without permanent addresses and telephone numbers which could not
be identified. Thus, these entities are excluded from the sample.

**Procedures**

A list of Black Churches was obtained from the Executive Assistant of a former President of the Black Ministers Alliance in Albany, Georgia, Dougherty County. The local directory was also used to compare and extend the acquired list that was used to distribute surveys. Ninety surveys, along with pre-addressed, stamped envelopes, were mailed to the churches from the compiled list of Black Churches in Dougherty County. Participant confidentiality was stressed in both oral and written form. The consent forms express the ethical merits of the data collection process as well as outline personal and material rights. Telephone calls were made using a combination of names compiled from the local directory and a list acquired from a former president of a local Black ministers association. During each call, a brief outline of the research purpose and the need for ministerial participation was provided.

After making several calls over a three week period to several ministerial leaders and/or church administrators, five ministers agreed to participate in the collection of qualitative interview data. Interview appointments were made to meet with the five ministerial leaders at their church offices, with the exception of one interview appointment which was conducted at the participant’s place of employment. All interviews were semi-structured qualitative face-to-face sessions that lasted at least 1 hour or more. The interviews began with a brief introduction and statement of the research purpose. There were four basic categories of open-ended questions asked during the interview: 1) perception of the Black Church as a social institution; 2) agenda of church locally and denominationally if applicable; 3) sex education initiatives locally and denominationally; and 4) perceived relevance and usefulness of sex education programming.
Ninety written surveys were distributed by mail to gain information from ministers unavailable for face-to-face interviews. The same basic categories of interview questions were included on the survey instrument. Survey participants were asked to provide demographic information; their perception of the Black Church’s agenda; as well as the relevance and usefulness of the church’s youth sex education initiatives. In order to capture the lived experience of the Black Church in practice, ethnographic observations in the natural setting of Black Church environments was also conducted.

In addition, participant observations provided a means of focusing on ministerial and congregants’ socio-discursive interactions during worship services, and outreach events. These observations entailed viewing artifacts (i.e. church covenants, monthly newsletters, and pamphlets from seminars), observing individual interactions, their body language and response to others in the setting, listening, and at times asking questions to acquire a sense of a particular setting/experience and the people therein.

Field notes were taken during participant observation of three events relating to youth sex education. A family conference was held at a non-denominational church during which three health and social service professionals provided information pertaining to adolescent sex education. The second event was a regularly held outreach event where adolescents discussed various topics including sexual pressures from peers and adults, as well as other risk behaviors. The final event was a youth fair held at a Baptist church were various community entities provided preventative health care information. Detailed notes were recorded for each of the three youth events attended over the course of the past year.
Sample

Participants for this study were recruited from Black churches within Dougherty County, Georgia to comprise a purposively selected sample. The selection criteria required church leaders must occupy an official position on the church staff, and/or ministerial board, or operate in an official youth ministry capacity authorized and confirmed by the Pastor. Four ministers including 3 male pastors (1 assistant pastor) and 1 female assistant pastor consented to participate in the recorded interview portion of the study. Twenty pastors provided written survey responses that were received via mail or fax.

Data Analysis

Ministry leaders were asked to participate in recorded interviews providing responses to questions related to the content and perceived relevance of the church’s agenda setting process, and adolescent sex education initiatives. The recorded interviews were professionally transcribed using “Total Eclipse” proprietary software, used by court reporters and CART providers that provide an html index. The data was formatted into numbered lines and identified by interviewee. The transcripts were read to descriptive and/or interpretative categories, and the html index was used to statistically count and group repetitive words to identify themes.

Afterward, the interview transcripts, survey responses and observation notes were reread to flesh out themes and sub-themes that relate to strategies which described larger processes and interactions. I then interrogated the themes according to functions, to detect patterns that related to research questions. The difference between the contemporary and traditional Black Church was a persistent theme throughout the study. Four broad themes emerged from the reading of the transcripts and survey responses; the first theme was the “church as a source of empowerment.” The second theme was the “church as vehicle for economic and community development.” The
third theme was the “church as educational proponent.” Finally, the fourth theme was the “church as spiritual center.” Emerging themes guided the comparative evaluation of the behavioral intentions and attitudinal perceptions of Black church gatekeepers.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Contemporary versus Traditional Black Church

The issues facing the Black Church directly relate to the content of its agenda.

Traditionally, the Black Church agenda related to civil rights, racism, and other concerns resulting from injustices and inequalities. Today, those same concerns exist, though the context and manner in which these concerns manifest in Black society are different. Overwhelmingly, respondents acknowledge the Black Church as the primary means through which Black society’s institutional and cultural needs are met. Historically, civic and political advancements were the hallmarks of the Black Church’s agenda. However, several participants felt that the of the Black Church’s agenda is more decentralized in the sense that each church employs a holistic approach to empowering its congregants rather than a monolithic spiritual perspective.

Evangelic concerns are still the core focus of the church’s agenda; however most of the individuals seeking refuge in the sanctuary of the church are looking for more than a word from God. According to one pastor:

If a man comes to us in a state of physical hunger, burdened by financial constraints, at the point of eviction, the first thing he’s seeking is relief from the material weights that are besetting him. So it is our responsibility to take care of the tangible needs of individuals with the same spirit of excellence that we put forth in presenting Jesus. How does that look? We feed him; we connect him with resources that will meet the present financial needs. All of these issues are very real and often keep individuals from hearing the message of salvation. The word of God says, He is a present help in the time of trouble and the church must be the present help for those in need.
Because of secularization, escalating health and sexuality concerns and socioeconomic challenges the contemporary Black Church must address the spiritual, physical, and social wellbeing of its people. The traditional focus of the Black Church has been Sunday morning worship that supported Blacks’ struggle in society. It provided the fuel needed to face another week of the same oppression. Nevertheless, the twenty-first century Black Church’s agenda emphasizes ownership and control of resources rather than the dependency upon external resources. As one pastor suggests, “African Americans must become possessors rather than occupiers, we must secure assets and resources that we control. This also includes the church which has the responsibility of leading the community.”

There are only a limited number of progressive congregations that have implemented agendas which produces spiritual, financial, and physical prosperity. One pastor spoke of the need for the Black Church to become more strategic in its endeavors to transform a nation:

What I know is the Southern Baptist Black Church. One of the things we Baptists have mastered is church. I believe it was Bishop T.D. Jakes who said, “Traditionally, the church has only had church.” We’ve perfected the shout, the hoop, the right body movements, and speaking in tongues. But at the end of the day how many lives have we honestly changed? The twenty-first century Black Church has to teach Black folk to want more than a hand out or supplements. We must equip them with the necessary tools to overcome oppression and poverty, enabling them to secure their territory. I’m talking about tangible resources, rather than a good sermon.

Although most pastors value the rhetorical gift of the Southern Black Preacher, they also understand the need for developing and implementing coping strategies for life. What the contemporary pastors in this study promote is the execution of the word of God. Therefore, it
becomes the responsibility of the church to generate sufficient revenue and intellectual properties to sustain its operation, as well as to fund community outreach and ongoing economic development initiatives.

Sermons whether in the form of an eloquent rhetorical addresses, simple or complex narratives, or even a combination of both forms are very similar to news frames. Both sermons and news frames weave key concepts of an issue in a manner that reproduces predetermined interpretations for audience members. Among the prevalent issues affecting African American adolescents in the South are STDs, HIV/AIDS, and teen pregnancy. The discursive strategies ministerial leaders use to frame sexuality concerns influence the manner in which community members interpret adverse implications. Typically, ministerial leaders invoke coercive power of God to reinforce sexuality ideas by illuminating the sin of premarital sex and other sexuality issues deemed sinful acts against the will of God. This strategy aligns with Norris, Kern & Just (2003) claim that decision-makers strategically frame issues with the express goal of seducing audience members into agreement.

Over half of the respondents believe the Black Church has forged a new agenda. They described the new agenda as a comprehensive effort to address the economic, educational, and social demands of the day. Several also suggested that the traditional agenda of the Black Church is both antiquated and inadequate to meet the needs in this millennium. “Moving the spiritual cheese” is how one interviewee described the Black Church’s approach to a new agenda. Another summarized the shift by highlighting the need for the Black Church to expand its menu beyond a Jesus entrée:

The Black Church has to do more-- more than present Jesus now. And I’ll probably get in trouble for saying that, but I think that if the Black Church is going to be what the
Black community needs, she’s going to have to be more than a place to present and give people Jesus, because the needs are so much greater. I think that there are some exceptions to this rule that have transcended time. But I think overall, the mainstream Black Church still puts its greatest emphasis on Sunday worship, which is a tragic mistake. When we look at our agenda and our focus, I think we are passing out Jesus as the traditional church did it, but just not doing it only on Sunday in a two-hour span. So whether it’s through empowering a community, or through economic development, - we’re doing it through education, we’re doing it in the arena of spirit of excellence.

Through spiritual excellence, the church addresses material needs and demonstrates true compassion. One pastor reiterated the declaration of a new agenda for the Black Church by comparing the differences in approaches to material challenges:

You ask if the Black Church has forged a new agenda, and I would have to say absolutely. Consider the recent disaster in New Orleans or even think back to the floods here in Albany less than a decade back. A large portion of Black folk and many Black Churches found themselves in dire straits, without the very basic resources for survival. There was a lack of clothing, food, shelter, and the thought of how to get from day-to-day was more paralyzing. Now, if the same occurrence had taken place in the season of the traditional church. The greatest response from the church would have been the Board deciding who would get the benevolence offering, or in that time the penny offering. Today, the Black Church has vision statements, mission statements and strategic plans that provide financial and other resources to meet the material needs of those suffering. For example, our church had vans and moving equipment to assist people with moving their things prior to the water coming. Our Men’s Ministry provided actual labor to help
with rebuilding homes…The church had various resources on-hand to meet real needs that far exceed a penny offering.

Societal demands generally exceed the financial and physical resources of the Black Church. For example, one pastor indicated that a large portion of most Black Church members are financial stressed. Though many might have a desire to financially support the church’s agenda, they are unable to do so.

Many pastors suggest the only way to overcome societal challenges is to have a more comprehensive and innovative vision for the church. Almost two-thirds of the informants referenced the church as being “stuck,” an institution laden with fallacies and flaws; nevertheless it remains the nucleus of the Black community or more aptly put:

The thing about the African American community, if the Black Church doesn’t address it, if the Black Church doesn’t do it, for the most part the Black community isn’t going to get it…Mama’s milk really is the Black Church’s breast, and if the church doesn’t have a breast, the Black community ain’t going to have nothing to suck on. It’s going to die.

Thus, the instrumental functions of the church repeatedly out weigh the occasional fallacies and flaws of a few ministers. When asked if they considered the Black Church to be a social institution in the community, two-thirds responded yes. The Black Church continues to be perceived as one of the most influential institutions in the Black community that seeks to save and serve a nation of weltering people.

Interview informants were asked about distinctions between traditional and contemporary Black Churches. Repeatedly, interview participants claimed that the fundamental message of the contemporary Black Church is consistent with that of the traditional church; however the contemporary church has adjusted its message to connect with present challenges. A youth
pastor stated, “I think what is happening now, the Black Church is taking a more collective view at the total man…we are facing a lot of culture issues, a lot of fads, a lot of styles.” The contemporary Black Church is forced to compete with sources and issues that were less prevalent some thirty to forty years ago. Respondents identified heightened economic disparities, mass media influence, and technological advances as chief concerns impacting the quality of African American lives. They consider educational and economic disparities as coexisting concerns within the Black Church.

Seventy-five percent of the interviewees cited adult literacy and entrepreneurship as major concerns. These vital issues must be addressed by the contemporary church if real changes are to occur in the Black community. During a follow-up conversation with a survey participant, the minister identified illiteracy as a cornerstone to many of the ills the Black Church is facing:

You know there was a season when an uneducated man could make a decent living, but today we are seeing the backlash of that season. That same uneducated man is now considered a relic, ill prepared for retirement or advancement in employment simply because of his inability to grow with technological changes. I say this because most of our churches have a lot of members who have not done anything to change with the new season.

When asked about forging a new agenda for the Black Church, almost half of the pastors spoke of the difficulty in getting the entire congregation to embrace a new agenda. Several referenced the stiffneckness of congregants that maintain a ‘the-way-we-always-done-it’ attitude, or the group that does not support the church’s financial investment in the community. On the other hand, some ministers feel the church spends too much time as a welfare agency. One survey
participant stated, "I still believe the true church is a living organism where the Spirit of Christ abode, but what is has turned into for many is a welfare agency.” The lack of consensus on issues such as community development, and social service, versus a spiritual focus diminishes the church’s power to influence change whether individually or collectively.

Several of the pastors use their pulpit to admonish African Americans to assume responsibility for changing their communities. Assuming responsibility entailed taking advantage of educational opportunities, using their voice politically, and becoming involved in community investment. Pastors equate academic excellence to spiritual excellence, as one pastor described the correlation as kinsman:

   The mind and soul, school and church are all first cousins, brother and sister children.
   Throughout our history the church has served as an educational institution. On the current watch, one of the church’s failures has been the insufficient address of adult literacy.

Another pastor described adult literacy as a neglected issue of most Black Church’s agenda:

   We’ve got people in my church that I had no idea did not have their high school diploma, not to think GED. I never would have thought they didn’t have a high school diploma. To find the number of seniors that didn’t have diplomas was shocking. Most churches that will address education address it on the childhood level. And so we (Black Church) may have an after school program, - which we do, and that is what we normally consider our educational piece.

He went on to share the joy of watching a 65 year old man partner with his employer to attend the 1½ hour, 3 nights a week adult literacy program through completion.
A memorable conversation with a senior church member illustrates the pastor’s influence. She shared her story of going back to school after forty or so years to get her GED and is currently enrolled in college. The passion with which she spoke of the love for her pastor and his vision of hope for the community was powerful. She recounted how the pastor talked about not being complacent and satisfied with just getting by, or settling for a ‘robbing Peter to pay Paul’ mentality. Going back to school was a true leap of faith and hope for herself and her children:

Pastor spent months almost begging us to go to the classes here at the church. He said to stop complaining about what our children wasn’t doing cause they was doing what they see us do. If we wanted to see our children do better we needed to do better, set an example for them to follow and stop expecting him and everybody else to do what we could do for our children. He had preached it to us a lot but it was one evening at Bible Study that I knew he was talking to me; all I could do was cry. But I ain’t cryin’ no more bless God!

The pastor’s passion for ministering to the whole person is clearly evident in the eyes of this woman and others. Often times it was difficult to make a clear distinction between informants’ passionate description of the church and their pastor. The church and pastor seemed to be synonymous entities for many parishioners, particularly for elder members.

As many of the pastors look to the future of the Black Church, their agendas become more complex. Transforming the life of individuals and the community begins with providing a spiritual infrastructure; however meeting the challenges of the day is a foremost goal. Though most share this sentiment regarding the Black Church, how they choose to address it differs. The findings suggest that various social and cultural challenges are creating fragments within the
community that have spilled over into the operation of the church to some degree. The number of local Black Churches in the rural South has increased tremendously since the Civil Rights Movement. For some these increases have diminished the functional and structural character of the Black Church. Several pastors implied the desire of some ministers to establish mega-churches or shift their denominational affiliation is driven by too strong a focus on secular gains, personal gratification, and obtaining elite church status.

The sole female interviewee indicated the conventional definition of the Black Church is no longer thought of in terms of a grand institution, but rather single entities due to a lack of unity within and across denominations. The traditional understanding of the Black Church as a social entity has been fundamentally replaced by the individual operation of free-standing church bodies. Several pastors referenced the traditional corporate fellowship patterns of the Southern Black Church in terms of the church’s twice monthly worship services. The fellowship pattern of the traditional Black Church was described as a vital communal support mechanism:

“In times past, congregants would usually fellowship at their ‘home church’ first and third or second and fourth Sundays, which allowed communal support within the Black religious experience.”

On opposite worship Sundays sister churches within the Southern Black community fellowshipped with one another. Senior churchgoers voiced similar sentiment regarding the absence of the historical fellowship practice that was the origin of networking for the Black community. In contrast to traditional practices, most of the pastors interviewed indicated their congregation met for weekly worship services. Additionally, half also met for midweek and midday services leaving little time to fellowship with sister congregations other than on special occasions (i.e. anniversaries, and revivals).
When asked to describe ways in which limited fellowship has affected the Black Church, many of the informants spoke in terms of a lost sense of embedded nurture. Similarly, others consider the lack of fellowship as a rupture in the Black community. A former missionary leader of the Baptist convention stated,” The ethic of caring that once permeated our community has severely diminished because no one reaches out beyond their own homes and church families.” Collaborative efforts across denominations are not a vital factor in most Black Church agendas. This keeps the vision of the pastor close to a centralized home space as suggested by one pastor:

Fellowship with another church creates unity and extends the vision of the church into the community more effectively. Fellowship created a safe haven in the Black community that is sorely missing. We need to move back to the place where everybody knew everybody’s child, because everybody fellowshipped in the same place. Everybody was watching everybody’s child, and correcting everybody’s child, because we knew each other.

An extreme majority of respondents reported they have ceased to actively engage in state or national denominational level governance, which affords the opportunity to concentrate their time and resources toward local efforts. Very few of the respondents indicated any official involvement with denominational organizations regionally or nationally. The results suggest the local Black Church has transcended to an independent self-governing institution within the Black community. For instance, a former president of a local denominational organization stated:

I think that our generations are becoming so fragmented and so individualized that there aren’t many pastors who are really throwing as much to association and convention efforts. I think more pastors may be influenced from televangelists than denominational presidents and moderators of associations…Because more progressive guys are more and
more disassociating with associations, conventions, and they’re just going to a
cconference, getting what they what and leaving, without further obligation. But certainly
there are those who are going to have some denominational ties, whether Baptists or
Methodists, who have some obligations to their bishops. But even with my friends who
are part of a more structured obligated denomination, such as AME, even they have their
own individual agenda more so than maybe years ago.

By contrast, other respondents believe the increasing disassociation within and across
denominations negatively impact the ability of ministerial leadership to meet the needs of the
community.

Pastoral Agency and the Local Agenda

The findings show that few congregations are governed by an agenda set by
denominational associations or conventional guidance. Their agendas are established by their
pastors and implemented under his/her direction. These findings suggest local ministerial
leadership establishes the agenda in the Black Church. When asked to identify the gatekeepers
of the Black church’s agenda, informants’ primary response was the pastor and leadership team.
More specifically, the pastor is the gatekeeper of the Black Church’s agenda, which is given to
him/her by God. Regarding research question (1), Who are the gatekeepers of the Black
Church’s agenda: over half of all respondents identified the pastor and leadership team as the
gatekeepers of the local church’s agenda. The following description provided by an interviewee
best describes who sets the agenda in the Black Church:

Our senior pastor sets the agenda, but what happens is he also appoints ministers over
different areas, like the youth minister, the minister of Christian education, the music
minister. So once he pours into us, “This is the direction I want to see this ministry go,” it’s up to that minister to manifest it, to make it happen.

Thus, a unique characteristic of most Black Church denominations is the fact that the pastor sets the agenda for the local church, particularly in Baptist denominations.

It should be noted that each of the pastors stressed the point that God is the divine gatekeeper of any agenda for the Black Church. Ninety-six percent of the respondents noted that the agenda of the Black Church is a divine mandate given by God. One pastor adamantly stressed the process as a move of God, “One of the things that need to be understood is the fact that God gives the pastor the agenda for that local ministry that he’s pastoring. And no convention can do that.” This study shows varying perceptions regarding local versus denominational control of Black Church’s agenda. Some perceive the isolated execution of an individual church’s agenda as fragmented:

I see a need for the Black Church to stress more unity in the Black community. In my mind, that means fewer churches, larger outreaches, fewer denominations. Everybody has their own denomination. The church is splintered even more because every denomination has four or five churches in the same little area.

In contrast, others assert that concentration on a local agenda is vital to the progressive move of the church in meeting the current needs of the Black community. Despite differences in perceptions of Black Church fragmentation, seventy-seven percent of the pastors agreed that the Black Church continues to serve as a viable social institution contributing to the overall development of the community. They place great value on the instrumental function of the church.
Congregants also expressed their appreciation for benefits gained as a result of the church’s instrumental function. Some equated the agency of the church with that of its pastor, when speaking of their faith experience the terms church and pastor seemed to be used interchangeable. Over fifty percent of congregants suggested the tremendous growth of the church is directly related to the agency of the pastor:

Our church has been in this community for over a hundred years, we had about six pastors during that time. And although we have been one of the larger churches in town, the biggest growth we’ve had was with preachers that had a bigger picture of heaven than just within the walls of the sanctuary, if you know what I mean. They were active in the community with politics, the school, and the life of Black folk in the town. So I guess the best way to describe how I feel about the progress of the Black Church I got to talk about the Black preacher.

The pastor’s role in the Black Church is a significant one. The vast majority of Black Churches in the South, more specific in Albany, Georgia are located in lower-income economically deprived areas of the city. Nonetheless, over fifty percent of the congregants are middle-class commuters from within the city or surrounding areas. Several parishioners at two of the churches visited reported they travel up to thirty-five plus miles to attend church. Many are attracted to the pastors’ progressive vision for the church as well as his/her status in the community. One individual indicated he liked the way the pastor encourages Black folk to create a legacy of wealth for the next generation:

He teaches us to develop ourselves; it can mean going back to school to get a better job, or developing a constructive business plan to build capital for ourselves. If we do this
then we change the landscape our family and community, rather than waiting on someone else to do it for us.

Over fifty percent of ministerial leaders indicated their goal is to empower the Black community in three primary ways: spiritually, financially, and educationally. They tend to view the three approaches as key factors in helping the community face the unprecedented social and economic challenges of today. Twenty percent of respondents felt the growth of local church bodies is related to the increase of pastors’ status and subsequent disconnect from external judiciary. When local churches experience growth, the agency of its pastor expands affording him/her greater prominence. During research observations there appeared to be a connection between pastoral prominence and congregation size. Ministerial leadership of larger churches appeared to have greater influence within communities and the city. The vast majority of pastors expend their resources toward the spiritual and economic restoration of the community in which their church is physically located. Several pastors believe channeling their resources locally is more strategic than becoming distracted by regional platforms. Regulating power within the community was a constant refrain spoken during Sunday morning and midweek sermons as well as other events.

Overwhelmingly, pastors admonished congregants to “catch hold” of the new vision for the Black Church, a vision that required a fresh perspective of the word of God. The new vision is a comprehensive idea of ministry, which means the mission of the church has to supersede evangelizing a few, providing a little benevolence, and stimulating emotions on Sunday morning. The means by which the visions are implemented differs; one pastor described his efforts as:

One of the instrumental functions of our ministry is our outreach program. We have an outreach program that sits directly in the heart of a low-income community, where we
give away so much food per year. We help people with group housing. We help people with bills, we help them with clothing.

Providing practical and welfare agency for the community is an all consuming task for many of the Black Churches in Dougherty, County. Very few have the resources to fund extensive social services programs, maintain a staff, and meet operational costs.

When speaking about the financial challenges in the Black community, one pastor told of a Sunday message during which he made an appeal to those individuals utilizing sources other than the bank to cash their checks:

I’m going to tell you what God told me to tell you, to help you open up a savings account. I don’t care if your credit is bad, I’m going to call the bank and tell them we’re going to stand with you…We are going to give you the minimum money that is needed to open up a savings account to get you started. So from now on you won’t have to go to the liquor store to get your check cashed and pay the liquor store $3 or more to cash your check.

He revealed that a minuscule response was given to his appeal, though he was sure a significant number of individuals fit into the category of individuals to which his appeal was directed. The pastor was willing to exercise faith and utilize his agency within the community to assist those congregants willing to take a step of faith and stand with him.

When pastors have established a significant level of spiritual and social prominence it becomes easy to take stands such as co-signing accounts for congregants. The aforementioned congregational appeal and assistance was provided without the church or pastor having to assume any personal financial obligation associated with the transactions. Thus, addressing
practical financial needs in this manner, ministers can assist congregants in overcoming financial challenges.

Interview data reflect the dire commitment of the ministerial leadership to heighten the quality of life for the people within the community. Data suggest the Black Church’s issues are extensive, but economics consistently underpinned concerns such as education, unemployment, and housing. The majority of respondents highlighted efforts to economically empower Blacks individually and collectively. For example, when asked how the church pursues economic development one respondent elaborated:

We’ve done three housing initiatives [duplex renovations, construction of single family and townhouse development, and the acquisition of 300 former military housing units] …But even now, it is not enough to give people affordable housing, we got to figure out how to make Black folk homeowners so that they don’t stay in the vicious cycle of renting. Then there’s the restaurant that we’re working on, that will be another way to create some jobs in the community…we got an architect who is designing one of our buildings in our community, about 60,000 square-foot facility into a wellness and fitness center. We’ve had workshops on financial management; credit counseling seminars to help folks learn how to get their credit cleaned up…we’ve got to be practical.

When asked to rank economic empowerment, education, health, unemployment, and adolescent risk behavior within their agenda, respondents’ top three issues were education, health, and economic empowerment respectively. Considering the broad emphasis of economic development the survey responses align with interview data in that education is seen as the foundation of health and economic strategies.
Respondents unanimously indicated that health issues contribute significantly to the economic decline of African Americans in the South. When the community is overcome by disproportionate health concerns, the results are evident in individual finances. The rural South is an area where declining governmental and social service support affect the elderly and economically disadvantaged who are burdened by astronomical medical expenses. In many instances the medical conditions are the result of poor life choices that result in obesity, HIV/AIDS, diabetes, high blood pressure, and various heart conditions. Raising the consciousness of African Americans is a crucial aspect of ministerial leadership. A pastor of one of the more progressive churches maintains that awareness must start with leadership:

We’ve got to admit that physically, we have a lot of unhealthy people who might tithe if they didn’t put as much in medicine. And maybe they wouldn’t have to put as much in medicine if we came up with some alternatives to our lifestyles, our eating habits. Because it doesn’t make sense to have leadership that doesn’t ultimately begin putting some things in practice and in motion, to make sure that we live long and that we live well.

Health alternatives are often presented through collaborative efforts with other social and health services within the community. For example, an interviewee described outreach collaborations with Phoebe Putney (a local hospital) as a key element of the church’s health agenda. The Ten Commandments in Heaven in Church is a program that teaches individuals about exercise, nutritional, and other health commitments.

Collectively, respondents indicated periodic blood drives, various screenings, a few workshops and health fairs, and weekly aerobics classes are vehicles by which health concerns are being addressed. When asked how the youth fit into the church’s health agenda, responses
varied significantly. Respondents reported recreational activities and limited sex education programming as two primary initiatives. The range of youth programming differed according to the number of youth in a particular church and the church leadership’s attitude toward emphasizing a youth agenda. When asked about the significance of the youth population in their church, over half of the respondents considered their youth population to be highly significant, while others reported moderate and little or no significance.

The Church’s Youth Agenda

All of the interviewees reported having some form of a youth agenda. About half of the churches surveyed have less than fifty youth in their congregations. However, this number of youth typically accounts for one-fourth to one half of the total congregation size, showing the significance of the youth population in these churches. The central focus of most youth agendas is to provide programming regarding broad concerns related to academic achievement and spiritual excellence.

The pastor and leadership team collaboratively set the youth agenda in these churches. Their youth program initiatives primarily entail Christian fellowships; separate youth worship services and Bible studies, and rap sessions and seminars. In addition, sports activities are salient youth agenda activities. Three of the churches have gyms or family life centers where youth activities are held throughout the year. A large majority of the churches sponsored sports teams, summer camps, and weekly tutorial services. Youth sex education programming was among the least emphasized agenda items.

Overall the pastors have an intellectual perception of the critical health issues facing their youth population, but few have taken the lead to implement strategies or programs that address the challenging concerns of sexuality issues. However, I did encounter a youth outreach
program that addresses a wide range of youth issues. Hype Night (HN) Outreach Program is a significant agenda item for the church as well as a respected outreach program for the community. HN initiatives include comprehensive youth programming that entails sex education, drug and alcohol abuse, child abuse, academic excellence, familial support, and employment preparation topics. It is a comprehensive youth outreach program presented in conjunction with other congregations (upon their request) in addition to community center programs.

Hype Night is structured as an open forum for youth to gain information and dialogue about issues impacting their lives. The youth pastor responsible for Hype Night described his approach to Hype Night programming as open and innovative:

My motto is ‘I like to talk about what you think about.’ We discuss the things that youth think about, that they don’t go home and talk to Mom and Dad about, the things they hear about and see on television, and hear from their friends and associates in school. We deal with everything from sexual identity to sex. You name it… we talk about it during our weekly service.

HN comprehensive sex education is a program that teaches abstinence as the preferred life choice for unmarried youth, but also addresses sexual health and identity concerns that arise in the different sessions. The ministerial director of HN describes the focus of the ministry and program as realistic:

Well, one of the things I love about this particular local body is we focus on real issues. So I don’t believe in saying anything is taboo or not to discuss. We just find the proper way to discuss everything. So we try to provide a platform where things can be spoken about or dealt with in a proper manner. I welcome all—one thing I try to do; I try to
provide an open platform where young people don’t feel offensive. Where they feel no matter what challenge or issue they may be facing, including identity challenges, sexual identity challenge they may be facing, they can come and get information.

The director indicated that teens are more open to discussing sexuality than most adults realize. They come to sessions with questions pertaining to contraception, what constitute a sexual intercourse, how to reject sexual advances, and other relevant sexual concerns.

The findings show academic achievement is a premier concern of most ministerial leadership pertaining to their youth agenda. Ministerial leaders have become frequent police of the school system and their youth’s academic progress. More than half of the respondents indicated that classroom visitations are an important component of their family care ministry. They claim such visits help to ensure that African American youth are not overlooked in the schools. Ministerial presence alerted school administration and the youth of the church’s concern for educational attainment. Ministers considered school visits as a form of worship.

For some churches, the extent of their youth agenda involves separate worship and tutorial assistance for youths. The youth ministry of some of the smaller congregations consists of a brief 20-25 minute message that is presented to the youth during the regular worship service. In these churches, during a designated time the youth are called to the alter area of the church where the pastor or youth minister delivers an abbreviated sermon that is presented in a narrative form. For example, during a brief fifteen minute period that was identified as Children’s Church, the pastor began his narrative entitled ‘Brotherly Love’ by asking the group if they had ever done anything bad to their brother or sister. The questions was answered in the affirmative by an excited group of about twenty children ranging in age from about 3-13 years of age. The pastor enthusiastically began to weave the story of Joseph and his brothers’ betrayal (Gen. 37) after
giving a few admonishments to stories of mischief a selected few shared. Youth church for some
churches consist of a structured worship service that the youth are responsible for officiating.
Youth ministers typically deliver the sermon, and the youth choir provides the music ministry.
Less than 10% of the respondents hold weekly youth worship services that are officiated by the
youth. About 60% allow the youth to lead the regular worship service at least once a month,
usually the fourth or fifth Sunday.

Christian education is a main artery of the Black Church. The depth of its connection to
the church’s agenda is relative to the youth population, educational level of the leadership, and
size of facility. Churches with a significant number of educators tend to have more elaborate
Christian Education ministries. However the size of the facility can impede implementation of
some programs, due to a lack of space. When space is limited, youth groups are typically
divided into larger age groups. Several churches have also opted to purchase properties
surrounding their sanctuary to secure adequate space for youth programs, particularly when there
are regularly scheduled programs such as after-school tutoring and regular worship events.

One-third of the respondents reported receipt of external federal funding and other grant
resources to support after-school programs for adolescents, tutorial assistance programs, and
summer camps. There are congregations with after-school and tutorial programs that are
sponsored solely by the church and staff by church members or community volunteers.
Churches that receive external funding usually hire teachers within the school system or college
students from the College of Education at the local university. The tutorial programs generally
operate five days of the week for about 3 hours after school hours.

Youth programming within the church provides youth with an opportunity to transform
their behaviors. One minister stated:
If we can begin to change young people’s minds, we can change their passions. When we can change their passions, we change their behaviors. The HIV rate and the teen pregnancy rate is affecting us more and more, because young people don’t know what to target their lives on. They are facing so many options on a daily basis; we have to give them other options to choose from.

Some churches provide recreational alternatives for their youth that include afternoon parties during school breaks, seasonal occasions such as Halloween parties; Boy and Girl Scouts troops; and overnight or weekend trips to campsites and amusement parks.

Recreational activities are also used as teaching moments for the youth. As one director expressed, “The church provides a safe environment for a lot of the kids in the community. It’s a place where they can learn the value of being apart of a team and extended family.” Based on observations the more progressive churches are making significant strives in counterbalancing the weaknesses in the school system regarding African American children as well as providing familial support for children formally and informally affiliated with their ministries. However, findings show the church has tremendous strives to make regarding youth sex education. This could partly be attributed to ministerial leadership’s perception of how problematic sexual risk behaviors are for the African American adolescents in their community.

**Adolescent Sex Education and the Local Youth Agenda**

The salience of adolescent sex education for the lives of the Black community and its church is not axiomatic. Myths and erroneous perceptions associated with HIV/AIDS and homosexuality impair the vision of ministerial leadership, which subsequently impacts society. When asked to compare the consequences of adolescent sexual risk behaviors in Dougherty County to other geographical areas, seventy-two percent of survey respondents indicated they
perceived it to be about the same, while the remaining twenty-eight percent felt it was a bigger problem locally than nationally. Almost half of the pastors indicated sex education had not been taught in their church during the last five years, or five years prior. When asked about the time given to sex education, of those that have provided sex education in the past five years, about one-third felt they spent too little time addressing the issue.

These findings show the Black Church has not made a significant influence in adolescent sexual behavior based on the limited provision of sex education initiatives. When asked if the local Black Church is having a significant influence in adolescent sexual behaviors, more than half said yes, and a little less than half said no. When asked the same question from a denominational perspective, a little less than half reported yes, and over half said no. Sexuality discourses within the church arena are still considered taboo for many, though three-quarters of the respondents indicated there were no topics they considered inappropriate to discuss. Some respondents considered certain topics to be better suited for discussion when both youth and parents are present.

Some respondents considered at least one of the following topics inappropriate to discuss with adolescents: contraception, anal intercourse, oral sex, homosexuality, and risk-taking behaviors (multiple partners, HIV/AIDS, and STDs), masturbation, sadomasochism, bestiality, and how to perform sexual acts. One respondent indicated she felt it would be very hard to engage topics such as anal sex, masturbation, and prevention within their church:

I think those issues would be very hard for our church, for Pastor, for our youth minister to address with the youth. We would actually bring the parent in and talk with the parent in the absence of the child about getting counseling—that’s what we would probably suggest, to get them to some professional who does not have God attached to talking to
them about sex. And sometimes I think that would make them feel a little less
uncomfortable, because it can almost become judgmental from the church.

Another interviewee heavily emphasized the point of separating youth from adults when certain
topics are discussed:

We don’t combine our youth with the adults in certain teachings. We have a separate
church for them, and we even have separate Bible studies for them; but there are some
things that youth and adults need to come together on.

Often times the youth hold a very different view regarding sexuality discussions than the pastors
or their parents.

During a family seminar that was presented as an open forum dialogue to specifically
address sexuality and the youth population, about one-fourth of the approximately fifty parents in
attendance sent their children out of the room at the onset of a discussion pertaining to risky
sexual behaviors of teens. Based on the body language and verbal comments of the youth, the
separation approach is considered antiquated and out-of-touch. After being asked to leave the
room, one young lady stated:

This is so crazy who she (her mother) think ain’t heard what they gonna be talking about.
That man ain’t showing nothing I ain’t seen or heard already, she the one gonna be
surprised, cause she out-of-touch with what’s really going on in the real world.

Another young man regarded his Mother’s decision to have him leave as old fashioned, “she
missing the beat of what is really going on cause I know this stuff they talking about already.
She still acting old fashioned about some sex.” At the beginning of the seminar the pastor
provided a preview of what would be covered, and then gave parents an opportunity to excuse
their children from the session if they were not comfortable with the subject matter. The pastor’s
preview of the seminar content included song lyrics that would be discussed and diseases affecting African American youth.

Although some of the parents were clearly uncomfortable exposing their children to certain content, the distress was not shared by the majority of the youth in attendance. Several of the youth demonstrated their frustration and utter disbelief in having to leave the room. They did so in the noisy manner in which they exited the room, murmuring and rolling their eyes and popping their lips. “They ain’t gonna talk about nothing we ain’t heard or saw” was a constant refrain during the exodus. Too often, parental embarrassment impedes the church’s effort to help the parents and youth become more cognizant of sexual risks youth are engaging, as well as contributing factors such as the media.

The seminar provided very explicit information regarding the sexual acts Christian teens are engaging. For example, one of the presenters showed a video of teens discussing various sexual acts, such as oral and anal sex, masturbations and sex toys, that they did not consider ‘real’ sexual intercourse. The tape also provided vivid depics and a candid discussion of the various diseases teens can contract through oral and anal sexual activities. At the conclusion of the tape, the facilitator preceded to say that she was glad so many parents had shocked expressions and exhibited offensive body language. Her compared the parental response to the problem the church is facing today:

Most of the facial and body expressions I’m seeing mirror the problem the Black Church, really the entire Christian community is facing today. Your expressions say to me that I don’t appreciate nor do I want to confront the sexual realities of my child. But guess what, your ignorance does not negate the reality that two out of three teens in this room are probably engaging in some form of sexual activity. And how your teens handle
sexual situations is directly related to their information base. So, my questions to you parent… what do you know? And what have you shared with your teen?

She continued to talk about the incomplete and erroneous messages teens receive from parents and ministerial leaders about sex. She admonished parents to be more specific and frank when talking to teens. Teens need to understand that any sexual activity that involves the genital is a sexual act. Parents need to talk candidly with their teens about masturbation, condoms (for female and males), and sexual disease, in addition to the Christian principle of abstinence.

Another presenter played various excerpts from popular songs the teens are downloading on their ipods, which I believe put more parents in shock than the video. Most of the parents admitted to hearing the melody of the songs but had no clue of the lyrical content. Speechless and dropped mouthed is the best description I can provide for the vast majority after hearing an amplified version of the lyrics to Kelis’s *Milkshake*:

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My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard
And they're like, it's better than yours
Damn right it's better than yours
I could teach you
But I have to charge
My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard
And they're like, it's better than yours
Damn right it's better than yours
I could teach you
But I have to charge
I know you want it
The thing that makes me
What the guys go crazy for
They lose their minds
The way I whine
I think it's time.
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and the Ying Yang Twin’s *Salt Shaker*:

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Shawty crunk on the floor wide open
Skeet so much they call her Billy Ocean
Roll like an eighteen wheeler
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That hoe fine but this hoe killer
She leakin, she's soakin' wet
She leakin, soakin' wet
Shake it like a salt shaker (shake it like a salt shaker)
Shake it like a salt shaker (shake it like a salt shaker).

I think the greatest difficulty one third of the parents experienced was digesting the fact the pastor would allow “such goings on, in the Lord house,” when most of them have the same lyrics played in their houses. The presenter provided a detailed interpretation of the lyrics and even demonstrated the dances that are accompaniments to the songs. The young minister ended his session by sharing the youth’s responses during a Bible class discussion of similar lyrics. He indicated the teens felt “it’s not the words in the song, but the beat they really listen to,” which is equivalent to the parents initial reactions when they heard the melodies without the lyrics.

High risk sexual behavior has serious physical, psychological, and socioeconomic implications for the Black community. The consequences of risk behaviors for Black youth are especially vexing. When asked to indicate sexual behaviors most facing youth today, informants mentioned sexual transmitted diseases and teen pregnancy. Informants believe that part of the problem in addressing youth sexuality is that parents and grandparents are becoming younger. They lack the wisdom and understanding to convey what is right and wrong. One interviewee suggested that the immaturity of parents perpetuates the cycle of risk behaviors:

I think because parents now are so young--if you have a daughter and the mother together, you honestly cannot tell sometimes who is who. It’s different from when we were growing up. Even my mother was young, when she had us, but there was a wisdom or maturity that shaped children’s behavior.

An interviewee pointed out that it is not uncommon to have a grandparent, parent, and child in the congregation with only fifteen or less years separating each generation. Breaking the vicious
cycles of sexual risk behaviors requires an honest and candid approach according to three interviewees.

It was also noted that part of the embarrassment issue for parents’ and ministerial leaders’ is reluctance to confront their own past histories:

We spend so much time running from the issues that are killing our children, simply because we are afraid to meet them at the crossroads in their lives. Because those are the exact same crossroads we’ve visited and made the wrong turn ourselves.

In order to reach youth, most pastors believe it is critical for sexual information to be presented in an open and relevant context. An elderly churchgoer stated:

It’s time the church stop whispering about these babies having babies. We need to talk to them about keeping themselves and how to take care them babies so they don’t go do it again. The days are gone when you just bring the girl before the church; they need to call out that lil rascal or old man too.

The data reveals a gender distinction in some of the pastor’s response to sexual risk behaviors of youth. Typically, the female youth are the ones that are silenced and denied participation in church activities.

Three of the four interviewees reported that six or more young ladies in their congregations had become pregnant within the last year. However, they did not provide information on the young men responsible for the impregnations. When asked about gender differences in consequences the church imposes on youth due to sexual behaviors, one half of the interviewees indicated there are no gender differences, while the other half reported there are unofficial differences. Discouraging the perpetuation of premarital sex and reinforcing Biblical
doctrine were the reasons given for strict actions that are imposed on young ladies that become pregnant. As one minister said:

I’ve taken them out of the ministries that they were participating in and done something as an alternative…I took them out of the ministry simply because to allow them to continue to do what they’ve been doing shows that we support them in their endeavor of getting this child before marriage…We keep them from thinking they can sit back and have another child and keep getting handouts from other people.

When asked to discuss the alternatives given to the young ladies that become pregnant, this pastor described the alternatives as support mechanisms. Some of the alternatives identified are parenting classes and family ministry that emphasis the responsibility and role the young lady must assume to care for the child and herself. The pastor also described the silencing period as a season of spiritual and emotional restoration for the young lady. In contrast, other ministers allow the young ladies to continue to function in their regular roles within the church. They also develop strategies that will meet that particular individual’s situation. Young ladies are partnered with teachers and parents that have shared similar life experiences to coach the young lady in a healthy direction.

In most churches, there appears to be differences in judgment and consequences relative to young ladies and men regarding pregnancy. This is partially because soliciting information on the male draws offense. It is reported that parents have also become defensive when information is requested about the young man.

Several ministers indicated the absence of parental presence in young people’s lives requires the church to assume a more active role in directing the decision-making process of
youth. In the absence of parental direction, youth may depend on BET, MTV and other media influences to direct their sexual behaviors. As one informant posits:

They’re exposed to everything, so they don’t know that this is good, this is positive. The young girls don’t know how not to be fast, because all they watch is BET and the girls with no clothes on, and the boys putting moneys in their G-string.

Ministers believe the level of media exposure and peer pressure strongly influences adolescent into sexual activities that impact the remainder of their lives. Informants in this study believe it is vitally important for churches to provide strategies and information that guides adolescents into ethical choices, including strategies for youths that are sexually active:

Most of the time when young people come to us, they come to us already trapped in issues, trapped in different types of sexual relationships, or they’re on the verge of trying to go there. Too often, we haven’t given them strategies, so there is this gap. So I bring my Bible to church, but I wrestle with questions in my mind: Is oral sex sex? What if I get pregnant, is it okay to have an abortion, do I tell my Mama? The church had to deal with the real issues young people are questioning daily, specifically because of all the sexually explicit material that bombards them.

One of the critical debates in the religious arena has focused on the issue of abstinence and safe sex practices. Youth today reside in a culture where sexuality permeates the images and messages they encounter daily. The statistics and prior experience indicates the abstinence challenge is very complex. Most pastors believe it is important for youth to understand both the benefits of abstinence and risk preventions. The interview data does not show evidence of comprehensive sex education initiatives within the Black Church; however the survey data suggests otherwise. When asked to describe their church’s approach to sex education, the
majority felt that abstinence education is paramount, over half also felt it is necessary to address safe sex practices also. When asked if their ministry provides complete information including the pros and cons of abstinence and contraceptives, more than half reported yes, and two-tenths no. Many religious leaders agree that the promotion of abstinence is fundamentally sound.

When speaking about abstinence only policies in the church, one respondent stated, “We can sort of dance around it, but the truth is, 98-99% of them pretty much know the deal.” The findings suggest that abstinence is the ultimate goal of sex education programming, but the reality is that a significant number of African American adolescents in the church are not abstaining. Therefore, the church has to adjust its strategies to address the actualization of adolescent behavior:

Our primary objective is to stress abstinence, but the church is forced to raise the consciousness of the old and young to all types of sexual content. If we don’t we are wasting our time…Thinking is the main key, our second goal is to renew their minds about what they think about sexuality or why they think about it, then you need to help them to identify certain behavior patterns.

Various studies conducted by the Kaiser Foundation and CDC suggest the abstinence aspect is important, but abstinence only messages do not serve the Black community well in light of the disproportionate statistics associated with African American adolescents.

This study posed the question, What are ministry leaders’ perceptions of adolescent sex education? There appears to be three distinct responses to this question. 1) Some ministers believe the issue of adolescent sexual risk behaviors is not extremely significant compared to other geographical areas; 2) too little is being done in the Black Church to address the sexual risk of African Americans; 3) and the Black Church has a responsibility to educate and engage their
youth in open sexuality discourse. Although the perceptions align with governmental and public health officials, this study shows there is a tremendous gap between perceptions of and implementation of initiatives. There is a difference between what they are actually doing and initiatives pastors plan to implement. When asked to elaborate on the content of their youth agenda, several pastors utilized futuristic language to describe specific initiatives relating to sex education. Adolescent sex education could be another form of promoting spiritual excellence for youth according to the report of a few progressive pastors.

One of the tools some churches use to help youth honor their spiritual commitment to abstinence are covenants. Over ninety percent of the pastors cited spiritual excellence and worship as two foundational teachings. They consider both to be more than an emotional experience on Sunday, but a lifestyle that dictates behaviors. Less than one-third of the respondents provided an opportunity for youth to engage in abstinence covenants. The covenants are usually signed by the youth during a ceremony before the congregation. There are typically four general categories of commitments the youth must make: (1) academic performance, (2) involvement with ministry, (3) sexual abstinence unless married, and (4) abstain from drug and alcohol use. Covenants are another support mechanism that helps to reinforce spiritual excellence and ethical decision-making in the lives of youths in the Black Church, for some it services as a rite of passage validating their walk with God.

This study asked as a research question, How do ministry leaders evaluate the usefulness and relevance of their church’s agenda regarding adolescent sex education? The response to this question from ministerial leaders is that they perceive the sex education agenda as marginal or “average”. Over half of the respondents acknowledge there is much work for the Black Church to do in order to close the gap pertaining to adolescent sexual risk behavior. Even the youth
minister of an exemplary comprehensive sex education program views adolescent sex education efforts as midline:

I would say half and half. The reason why I would say half and half, we do everything possible to provide information, to provide strategies, to provide other options for young people to see, to reeducate them. The other half is on them not to receive what’s said, then say, okay, that’s something for me.

Societal changes have an impact in the structure of the Black Church’s agenda. Socioeconomic challenges and limited education of its members has become the main focus of the contemporary Black Church. The church tends to relegate salient sexuality issues such as adolescent sex education to the periphery of its agenda. Most ministerial leaders emphasize the tremendous value of their youth population; however few have taken on the task of rescuing them from the precipice of sexual risk behavior. If the youth are indeed the hope and promise of the Black Church, a sharp turn must occur that will draw the attention of Southern Black Church leadership to sexual risk-taking behaviors of its youth.

In summary, the Black Church has changed from its traditional role. Local churches are not as tied to denominational structures as they used to be. Goals of civil and political advancement embraced by the Black Church have enlarged to include socioeconomic, education, social, and health issues, as well as political and, of course, spiritual issues. The minister is the prime gatekeeper of a church’s agenda. While ministerial leaders in this study consider their youth to be important, so many issues compete for the church agenda that less attention is paid to youth than what ministers would ideally prefer. The youth agenda focuses predominately on academic achievement, recreational opportunities, and spiritual excellence. In terms of sexuality education, very few churches have comprehensive or extensive sex education programs. Most
churches have produced little efforts in breaking the silence about sexuality; however there are a miniscule number of churches that are making great strides in combating the issues related to adolescent high risk sexual behavior including STDs, HIV/AIDS, sexual identity, and teen pregnancy.
Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

The primary focus of this study sought to understand who establishes the Black Church’s agenda and; to assess ministerial perceptions of the relevance and usefulness of sex education initiatives implemented by the church. This study examined agenda setting processes of the Southern Black Church by investigating the issue of adolescent sexual risk behavior. Black churches in Dougherty County, GA a southern rural county, where statistics related to adolescent sexual risk behaviors are alarming, provide the foundation for this study. Three research questions were posed to examine major concepts of the agenda setting theory. The findings suggest sexual risk behaviors plaguing African American youth are not being adequately addressed by Southern Black churches.

The process by which agenda items are prioritized and given prominence is critical to any discussion of a social institution’s ability to transform adolescent behavior. The Black Church is an important social institution in the Black community because it possesses the opportunity to influence and regulate the behavior of its constituents. Historically, it has been within the confines of the Black Church that problems, policy, and politics have come together for the Black community. Generally, it has been the pastor of Black congregations that assumed the role of activists, formal and informal political representatives, as well as spiritual advisors. These various roles helped to establish and maintain the power attributed to ministerial leaders, especially pastors. Pastors continue to negotiate acceptable solutions to problematic concerns within the community they advocate for and empower individuals within the Black community. Thus, the pulpit is a vital platform by which youth can be empowered to transform their high risk sexual behaviors. Yet, the problematic situation of African American adolescent sexual risk
behavior in the rural South is complicated further by the silence or paralysis of ministerial leadership. Although pastors frequently referenced the notion that knowledge is a critical factor in the process of empowering the community, they fail to embrace the possibilities of fully empowering their youth population.

The first step in exploring the agenda setting process of the church was to establish the gatekeepers of the agenda process. Who are the players that determine what issues are salient enough to become agenda items within the structure of the Black Church and consequently the Black community? Cobb & Elder (1983) suggests no issue will ever advance to systemic or institutional agendas without the express consent of gatekeepers. When considering the preeminent decision-makers in the Black community, one has to look beyond the pastors and key ministerial leaders. Consistently, this study identified the pastor and/or the pastor and ministerial leaders as the decision-makers of the Black Church’s overall and youth agendas. They are the sole gatekeepers of the church’s agenda, and are often petitioned to assist governmental and health care agencies in strategic deliberations. These deliberations occur when problematic situations have reached epidemic status, such as the issue of adolescent sexual risk behaviors for African Americans, particularly in southern regions. As gatekeepers, pastors have the ability to turn the hearts and minds of adolescents toward healthier sexual decisions.

The findings of this study support previous contentions that the Black Church is the single most powerful and prestigious Black social institution. Likewise, the pastor inevitably emerges as one of the most powerful leaders in the community. One pastor described the resource of the church as “breast milk” which is an adequate depiction of the nurture the church has provided for centuries. Thus, the church is a vibrant institution pregnant with the possibilities of generating ideas that could help the Black community become more cognizant of
sexual risk concerns (Ball, Armistead, & Austin, 2003; Barnes, 2004; Coyne-Beasley & Schoenbach 2000; Rubin, Billingsley, & Caldwell, 1994). Traditionally, Black ministerial leaders have led their constituents toward positive social transformations. The prodigious presence of the Black minister is the seed of any potential transformation in the Black community. My findings align with previous literature regarding the potential of the Black Church to positively influence African Americans political and health consciousness. Today, progressive ministerial leaders have tremendous opportunities to affect local and national agendas.

America has recently witnessed the role that nationally recognized Black pastors such as Bishop T. D. Jakes and Bishop Eddie Long have played in shaping political agendas concerning disaster relief, and various governmentally funded faith-based initiatives. Even the President of the United States recognizes the power that Black pastors possess. Black pastors are being summoned to the White House and invited to take part in strategic planning sessions in an unprecedented fashion. Similarly, there are Black pastors in Dougherty County that have garnered the respect and accolades of local and state officials. They have been called upon to help develop strategies and manage grant programs to combat juvenile delinquency, decrease economic disparities, and support community development projects. The agenda setting theory helps to explain this new surge of Black pastoral presence in public policy arena. The charismatic appeal and power resources of Black pastors afford them greater opportunities to take part in constructing the public agenda.

There seems to be various forms of power the pastor engages to implement his/her vision for the church and community. As outlined in agenda setting theory, the pastor within the Black Church, from a relational power aspect has the ability to influence or transform actions (i.e.
youth risk behaviors). The ability of the Black pastor to stimulate change in the risk behaviors of youth is directly related to the systemic sanctions of church. Organizational symbolism is a structure through which organizational power is constituted and reproduced (Mumby, 1988). Black preachers are masters of the art of executing rhetorical and organizational symbolism (Barnes, 2004b; Best, 1998; DuBois, 2003). Hence, discursive acts are an essential factor in relations of power. In fact, discursive acts within the church are articulated in a fashion that seeks to reproduce behavioral patterns that align with its ideologies.

The Black Church is an organized social institution with socially constructed expectations. Sexuality from the church’s perspective is articulated in heteronormative terms that suggest one ideology or concept is privileged over another. In most instances, this excludes any provisions related to same-sex marriages or other types of same-sex relationships. The boundaries and tenets of the church discursively and in practice constrain individuals to behave in very specific ways. According to Christian teachings, sexual engagement prior to marriage is viewed as a sin that breaks fellowship between God and the individual. Therefore abstinence is the foundational teaching of most religious organization’s sex education programs. Likewise, male and female relationships are the ultimate relational lifestyle choices presented to young believers. However, reality and statistical evidence shows that many young believers do not abstain nor assume prescribed sexual preferences (Dyson, 2004; Hammonds, 1997; Smiley, 2003; Steinman & Zimmerman, 2004; Stephens & Phillips, 2003; West, 1999). Thus it proves necessary for pastors to find ways to embrace the entire youth population regardless of sexual practices and identities, and consider educating youth on safe sexual practices.

Less than ten percent of the churches in this study demonstrated a comprehensive youth agenda that could possibly meet the needs of the youth population in the Black Church. Charles
Johnson’s and Henry Richardson’s critique of the Black Church highlights the need for the Black Church to adopt a new framework for influencing Black youth. Their work speaks to the cultural shifts many churches are experiencing. The attention of a large portion of Black youth has turned away from the church. The church is forced to compete with sexual messages youth are exposed to in music, videos, television programming, and other forms of media one could conceive. Therefore, it is imperative that the contemporary Black Church explore not only the framing of sexuality discourse but the ways in which youth are interpreting the messages.

During a family forum analyzed in this study, one of the presenters suggested that the church must swiftly address the issues of anal and oral sex, because many Christian youth believe that engaging in anal and oral sex acts is not real sex. The preacher presents the message of abstinence but the ways in which youth interpret the message can be conflicting. Interpretation becomes a vital concern when youth maintain the belief that being a virgin equates to not having engaged in vaginal penetration only. Anal and oral sex is often viewed as a safe sexual activity because of the perception of little or no risk for pregnancy and opportunities of contracting HIV/AIDS are less than having penetrative intercourse. The risks however are still considerable, particularly for contracting STDs such as herpes and chlamydia. The director of a youth outreach program interviewed in this study indicated that mastering language of the new youth culture is a commodity many Black ministers do not value. He stated, “There is no way to we can expect our children to have a full understanding of sex when there are so many conflicts between the message of the church and what they get in the street.” The issue of interpretation flows both ways, if pastors have no knowledge of competing messages he/she is ineffective in any form of issue expansion.
Although the majority of the respondents considered their youth population to be highly significant, only half indicated that some form of sex education was taught in their church during past ten years. The lack of attention given to adolescent sex education could be attributed to the overwhelming belief that implications of African American adolescent sexual risk behaviors in Dougherty County is less devastating than national reports have established. Surprisingly, three-fourth of the respondents in this study believes the prevalence of teen pregnancy, STDs, and adolescent sexual activity in Dougherty County is equivalent to other geographical areas. If the shepherd fails to see the danger encroaching the flock, it becomes difficult to provide protection for the sheep. Most pastors did not hesitate to acknowledge sexuality issues are an enormous concern for African Americans. However, fiscal concerns and people resources impede many of the pastors’ ability to provide any significant response to adolescent sex education.

Fullilove (2001) talks about the reluctance of the church to address sexuality issues. He compares the sexuality discourse to an elephant standing in the middle of the room that no one wants to acknowledge. Based on our experience with Black Churches in the rural South, a more accurate description would be that the elephant instills a fear induced paralysis for many. Most respondents agree, too little time is spent on sex education in the church. Sexuality is still considered a taboo topic of discussion in many of the more traditionally structured church bodies. Dr. Robert M. Franklin found that Black ministers continue to take a conservative non-progressive approach regarding sexuality issues. Some pastors though have broken traditional paradigms by dedicating babies that are born out-of-wedlock and connecting youth with resources. In the church’s attempts to provide safe sex information, much work remains.

There is still division among the pastors regarding which sex education approach is best, whether abstinence only or a more comprehensive approach should be employed. The two large
congregations in this study revealed a comprehensive approach to sex education, which provided open dialogue about the importance of safe sexual practices as well as abstinence. However, we found a few of the smaller churches do not have comprehensive sex education initiatives associated with their youth agenda. Those few churches with sex education programming do an excellent job of networking with external resources to engage youth, parents, and the community in sexuality discourses. In particular, the Hype Night Outreach Program is a model other churches could consider duplicating. Their efforts show that separating youth during certain sexuality discussions is a practice several pastors might want to consider revisiting. Youth are being exposed to sexuality daily. It would prove beneficial for the church to provide a forum in which the youth, parents, and other resources can come together and dialogue openly.

During my participant observations, several youth indicated that the life skills and principles taught in outreach programs initiated by the church changed their risk taking behaviors. Youth mentioned sexual practices among the behaviors that were positively transformed as a result of participating in church-sponsored youth initiatives. Providing a safe environment conducive for youth to engage in open dialogue is a vital part of only a few Black Church youth agendas. A few pastors recognize the dire need to promote comprehensive sex education initiatives on their agendas. Some pastors take a very comprehensive approach to sex education by incorporating discussion of safe sex practices (i.e. birth control and condom usage) along with the principle advocation of abstinence. Fundamentally, the more progressive pastors are the ones that employ a more comprehensive approach to sex education initiatives. They seek not only to change the behavioral patterns of youth within their congregations, but are implementing outreach programs to reach additional youth within the community.
Some ministerial leaders, however, find comprehensive sex education initiatives to be contradictory to the church’s religious paradigm. The power relationship that exists between the Black pastor and community is a complex. Power dynamics are an innate facet of pastoral governance in the Black Church, which directs organizational practices and meaning formation (Mumby, 1983; Mukenge, 1983). Sex education within the church is structured such that the explicit ideology of abstinence is the perpetuated conception and practice of youth. The complex debates surrounding abstinence only approaches to sex education within the church lead to the second aspect of this investigation, which was to determine ministerial leaders’ perceptions of adolescent sex education.

Social institutions constantly draw attention to social problems affecting its members, because the list of concerns are often endless, decision-makers must prioritize the concerns by establishing and implementing agendas. Before an issue is considered as an agenda item decision-makers must have a significant level of issue awareness including all of the associated complexities. In terms of the Black Church in this study, the youth agenda, sex education strategies are complicated due to limited perception ministerial leaders have toward the issue of youth sexuality. There are few aggressive strategies being implemented to combat the severity of sexual risks in the Black community because of several pastors’ erroneous perception. On the other hand, many recognize the severity of the issue but are overtaxed by economic empowerment, community development, and academic concerns. A few pastors also mentioned the legal constraints they must consider when dealing with certain situations in the church. They indicated that ministers and other ministry leaders now walk a tight rope as spiritual advisor to ensure their efforts are not within the scope of professional counselor. The pastor provided the following comments:
There was a time when our youth could come in to talk with a ministry leader about situations they either refuse to or were unable for multiple reasons to talk over with a parent or guardian. For example, some years I had a young lady to come in the office to discuss her decision to have an abortion. She had not shared the information with her Aunt who she was living with at the time. And I would have to say the advice I shared back then would not be the same today. Simply because of malpractice concerns we face today. You should notice that a lot of Black pastor that use to speak against seminary training are now going to seminary.

Another pastor spoke of his congregation’s refusal to provide sexual protection for youth at the church during health fairs.

Many of the respondents felt the church helped youth by teaching them godly principles and instilling moral values. Ministerial leaders consider the church to be a social organization for African American youth in the community. It is a safe haven where many youth seek refuge from the streets and peer pressure to become sexually active. One pastor described the church’s outreach program as respite for a lot of youth in the surrounding community that are not official members of the church. He state:

We’ve purchase several properties to provide a respite for the increasing number of young people that view the church as a ‘safe house’. Many of them are the product of single households where the parent is missing more than present. For others it’s the one place where they can be a young person without having to think about the adult responsibilities they face at home. It’s not uncommon for twelve or thirteen year olds in this community to be caretakers for other siblings or addictive parents. So, when you talk about perception of our sex education, we are a safe place for a lot of young bodies. We
don’t like to talk about in the Black community or church, but the number of girls and boys that are being sexually molested is ridiculous.

Churches that have comprehensive outreach programs for youth and employ a more open dialogue approach to sex education showed more utility than those that only referenced sexual behavior during abbreviated Children’s Church services. At times the desires of the pastor and the congregation differ when it comes to youth sex education. There are times when the pastor would like to take a more aggressive approach to sex education, but the congregation disagrees with his/her plan of action. In one incident a pastor was asked to leave the church because of his views on providing protection for adolescents. Some pastors believe their sex education efforts provide a foundation for youth lives by helping them make better life choices.

On the other hand, many find it difficult to talk about sexuality in a realistic manner. When asked to discuss some of the difficulties, some respondents spoke of the conflict between teaching abstinence to youth they know are sexuality active. A few pastors perceive their sex education initiatives to be ineffective, because they are based on traditional principles that are not working with the youth. He described the traditional approach as follows:

Twenty years ago, the preacher could preach a thunderous sermon that would shame young folk into compliance or put so much fear in their heart they dared not think about sex or any other sin. Most of us our preaching the same message, although some have given up the thunder, it has no effect with most of our young girls and boys. They have no fear or shame about their sexual appetites. BET, MTV, Rap music and videos all make it hard for us to tell young people to ‘JUST SAY NO’ to sex, drugs, and other vices.
His comments align with much of the literature on the Black Church and sexuality. Black pastors are reluctant to discuss AIDS and teen pregnancy because of the moral judgments that weigh heavy in the religious atmosphere.

African American youth find it difficult to negotiate the prevalent hip-hop culture and the culture of the Black Church and community. Although there are overlaps in the cultural dimensions, there are extreme gaps in cultural patterns of thinking and subsequent behaviors. The Black Church and society also experience difficulty in adequately addressing the challenges associated with these cultural disparities. This is evident in the overall response of this study to the question of Black Churches’ sex education programming. Almost half of the respondents indicated that their churches provided useful and relevant sex education during the past ten years, but most of what actually occurs are commercial interruptions during the brief Children Church services or during the once a month Youth worship. I question the measure of usefulness and relevance these types of sex education initiatives can have considering the staggering statistics related to the geographical area. Because of the lack of or limited implementation of sex education programming in most of the churches, it does not appear that the Black Church currently serves as an agent of social control for youth.

Spillers (1987) and Hill Collins (2004) suggest that any attempt at Black empowerment by the Black Church or any other facet of society must take into account gender and sexuality before successfully addressing social challenges in the Black community. The church must consider the socialization process that occurs in the Black community and church. Some of the church’s practices and teaching should be critiqued regarding stereotypical gender differences. It is clear that males are socialized in our society to be interested in sex while women are socialized to be less sexual (Wood, 2003). The ways in which the church response to female adolescents
versus the males regarding teen pregnancy is directly related to traditional gender roles regarding sexuality and parenting (Gamble & Gamble, 2003; Wood, 2003). So we call into question the church’s practice of silencing young women that become pregnant out-of-wedlock. We also call into question the defensive nature of those that reject holding young men accountable, affording them the opportunity to become sideline participants in the teen pregnancy issue. The Black Church has the responsibility of creating a safe open space where the deconstruction of images, language, and other symbolisms relating to Black sexuality can occur.

Limitations

The central focus of this study was to explore the agenda setting processes of the Southern Black Church in relation to its adolescent sex education initiatives. We sought to understand the phenomenon of a specific population by restricting this study to Black Churches in Albany, Georgia. First, we would like to have conducted more recorded face-face interviews with ministers or received more surveys. This would have afforded us a broader, more comprehensive picture of the Southern Black Churches. Secondly, it would have been helpful to have interviewed or surveyed the youth of the churches. Finally, we would have liked more time for follow-up interviews to ask about the churches’ future sex education strategies. The findings however do provide insight into prioritizing of the Black Church initiatives for its youth and community. The results suggest that the Black Church continues to be a social institution providing critical instrumental functions for the community.

Recommendations

Black Church

Ministerial leadership must find a way to reduce the tensions between religiosity and practicality. We can start by defining ways to eliminate the gap between perception and practice
within the church. The church must consider more carefully sex education initiatives that are actually being implemented versus what is imagined as ideal. First, churches should be encouraged to engage in collaborations with social services providers to gain more insight of risks impacting their communities. Secondly, they should promote sex education in a comprehensive format that meets the need of youth that have previously and/or engaging in sexual activities. A comprehensive format would include information about abstinence, birth control and disease prevention. A comprehensive curriculum can support those who are sexually active. Finally, sexual prevention agencies should consider the underlying cultural and social factors that are unique to the Black community when collaborating with Black Churches.

Framing sexual behavior from a perspective of cultural differences assists in redefinition of the issue such that adequate attention is given by the public. Issue definition and control are key elements in promoting and maintaining an issue with the appropriate decision-makers’ agenda. Once the attention of the mass public becomes focused on a specific issue, consciousness manifests. Because adolescent sexual behavior is both a local and national issue, it is necessary to employ strategies that will first introduce the issue via a conscious awareness campaign. After gaining the serious attention of the public, the next step is to motivate alignment with the issue.

Awareness encompasses highlighting all aspects associated with sexual risk-taking behaviors, including the role these behaviors play in the welfare of African American adolescents. In order to fully legitimize and address the issue, other related concerns such as social and economic injustices should be incorporated in the agenda-building process. A collective, diverse plan of action is required to eradicate the complex issue of minority adolescent sexual high-risk taking behaviors. Building an agenda that addresses minority sexual
behavior entails a long-term commitment of continued efforts to access and persuade powerbrokers and a global public. The Black Church could frame the agenda in terms of the adverse consequences of minority adolescent sexual behavior. However, a different approach would be to emphasize the need for collective efforts in educational enlightenment, and health services.

**Future Research**

The present study extends previous research by examining a minority adolescent population, their sexual activities and the impact of religious influence. Unfortunately, the majority of previous research in this area has focused on Caucasian, non-Hispanic adolescents with minimal attention targeted toward minority adolescents. This occurs despite the fact that African American and Hispanic adolescents are disproportionately affected by the consequences of sexual risk-taking behaviors (Chapin, 2001; Dutra et al., 1999; Miller et al., 1999; Stanton, et al., 2000). Extended research can benefit our society by creating more studies that are reflective of the other minority adolescent population, such as Hispanics and Asian teens. Developing predictions that are applicable to the demographics of all minority adolescents will help to eliminate problematic consequences facing adolescents. Instituting options for social resource allocation can assist the minority adolescent population in gaining access to educational information pertaining to sexual health and safe sexual practices. Longitudinal studies need to be conducted to examine the implementation of Black Church youth agendas. Extensive evaluations could assist in discovering what strategies are making a difference in transforming youth risk behaviors.
References


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DuBois, W. E. B. (Ed.). (2003). *The negro church: Report of a social study made under the direction of Atlanta university; together with the proceedings of the eighth conference for the study of the negro problems, held at Atlanta university, may 26th, 1903*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press.


*Breaking the silence: In times like these*


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March 1, 2006

Dear Pastor:

I am Debra T. Wiley, a native of Albany, GA, former member of Greater Second Mt. Olive M.B.C., and a graduate student in the Department of Communication at the University of Cincinnati. I would really appreciate your participation in my master thesis research study involving the Southern Black Church’s response to adolescent sexual risk behavior.

My desire is to explore the essence Southern Black Church experience, specifically its agenda setting processes. In agreeing to participate, you will be asked to complete a survey with questions designed to provide demographic information; ministerial leaders’ perception of the Black Church’s agenda; as well as their perception of the relevance and usefulness of the church’s youth sex education initiatives. The average amount of time to complete the survey is about half an hour.

Please be assured that all data provided would be held in strict confidentiality. Your name will not be associated with your interview or survey responses in any way. However, if you would prefer, you can waive this right and your name will be used in all resulting publications. If you have any questions or need any additional information please feel free to call me at (513) 821-3995 or email at debra.wiley@uc.edu. Thank you for your assistance in this research effort.

Sincerely,

Debra T. Wiley

enclosures
2005-06 The Black Church Agenda And Adolescent Sex Education Survey

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. The information you provide will remain confidential. DO NOT write your name on this survey. Make sure to read each question. Place a mark to correspond with your response to each question.

Adolescent Sex Education and the Church's Agenda

1. DO YOU FEEL THE BLACK CHURCH HAS FORGED A NEW AGENDA OVER THE PAST 2 DECADES?
   □ Yes (Please Explain) ____________________________________________________________
   □ No (Please Explain) ____________________________________________________________

2. WHO SETS THE AGENDA FOR YOUR LOCAL CHURCH?
   □ Pastor Only
   □ Pastor & Leadership Team
   □ Denominational Executive Board
   □ Other (Please explain) _______________________________________________________

3. RANK THE FOLLOWING ISSUES ACCORDING TO YOUR LOCAL CHURCH'S AGENDA.
   [USE 1-5 TO RANK YOUR RESPONSES,]
   □ Economic Empowerment
   □ Education
   □ Health
   □ Unemployment
   □ Adolescent Risk Behaviors

4. WHO DETERMINES YOUR LOCAL CHURCH'S YOUTH INITIATIVES?
   □ Pastor Only
   □ Pastor & Leadership Team
   □ Denominational Executive Board
   □ Other __________________________________________

5. HOW SIGNIFICANT IS THE YOUTH POPULATION IN YOUR CONGREGATION?
   □ Highly Significant
   □ Moderately Significant
   □ Little or No Significance

6. IS THE BLACK CHURCH HAVING A SIGNIFICANT INFLUENCE REGARDING ADOLESCENT SEXUAL RISK-TAKING BEHAVIOR?
   Locally   As a collective or across denominations
7. Do you feel teen pregnancy, STDS, and adolescent sexual activity in general; are bigger problems in your county than they are in other geographical areas, smaller problems, or about the same?
- Bigger problems
- Smaller problems
- About the same

8. Has sex education been taught in your church during the last five years? By sex education I mean any activities or dialogues that discuss human reproduction, relationships, abstinence, AIDS, pregnancy prevention and the like.
- Yes
- No

9. Was sex education taught in your church prior to five years ago?
- Yes
- No

10. Which of following best describes your church’s approach to sex education?
- Abstinence from sexual intercourse is best for teens. Sex education should not provide information about condoms and other contraceptives.
- Abstinence from sexual intercourse is best but some teens do not abstain, so information about condoms and other contraception is provided.
- Abstinence from sexual intercourse is not the most important issue. Teaching adolescents to make responsible decisions about sex is the primary objective.

11. Overall, do you think your church spends too little time, too much time, or the right amount of time teaching sex education?
- Too little time
- Too much time
- The right amount of time

12. How useful do you think adolescents find sex education initiatives at your church?
- Very useful
- Somewhat useful
- Not very useful
- Not useful at all

13. Which of the following best describes your church’s policy about adolescent sex education initiatives.
- Parents have to give permission
- Parents are notified of sex education, but don’t have to sign a permission slip.
- Parents are not notified and do not have to sign permission slip.

14. Are the adolescents of your church provided an opportunity to sign abstinence covenants? Abstinence covenants are typically written and/or oral commitments youths make to not engage in sexual activities prior to marriage.
15. IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS, IS THERE EVIDENCE OF AN INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF ADOLESCENTS IN YOUR CHURCH ENGAGING IN ABSTINENCE COVENANTS?
   - [ ] Yes
   - [ ] No

16. HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE RELEVANCE OF YOUR SEX EDUCATION INITIATIVES?
   - [ ] Above average
   - [ ] Average
   - [ ] Below average

17. DO YOU FEEL YOUR MINISTRY PROVIDES COMPLETE INFORMATION INCLUDING THE PROS AND CONS OF ABSTINENCE AND CONTRACEPTIONS?
   - [ ] Yes
   - [ ] No

18. ARE THERE ANY SEXUAL TOPICS THAT YOU BELIEVE TO BE INAPPROPRIATE TO DISCUSS WITH ADOLESCENTS?
   - [ ] Yes
   - [ ] No

19. IF YOU ANSWERED YES TO THE PREVIOUS QUESTION, WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING WOULD YOU CONSIDER INAPPROPRIATE TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION? [PLEASE CHECK ALL THAT APPLY].
   - [ ] Contraception (prevention & protection)
   - [ ] Anal intercourse
   - [ ] Oral sex
   - [ ] Homosexuality
   - [ ] Risk-taking behaviors (i.e. multiple partners, HIV/AIDS, and STDs)
   - [ ] Other (Please list)

20. WHO DO YOU THINK SHOULD BE RESPONSIBLE FOR ADOLESCENT SEX EDUCATION? [PLEASE CHECK ALL THAT APPLY].
   - [ ] Parent
   - [ ] School
   - [ ] Church
   - [ ] Social Service Organizations (governmental, and private)

21. WHERE DO YOU BELIEVE ADOLESCENTS GET MOST OF THEIR INFORMATION ABOUT SEXUALITY? [PLEASE RANK THE FOLLOWING 1-8].
   - [ ] Parents
   - [ ] School
   - [ ] Church
   - [ ] Peers/Siblings
   - [ ] Media
   - [ ] Books

22. DO YOU CONSIDER THE BLACK CHURCH TO BE A SOCIAL INSTITUTION IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY?
23. CHURCH DENOMINATION
   - AME
   - Baptist
   - COGIC
   - Church of God
   - Full Gospel
   - Nondenominational
   - Other

24. CLERGY VS. NON-CLERGY
   - Pastor
   - Other Minister
   - Non-Clergy

25. TENURE OF PASTOR
   - Five years or less
   - 6 to 10
   - 11 to 20
   - Twenty-one years or more

26. GENDER
   - Female
   - Male

27. AGE OF PASTOR
   - Age 25 or less
   - Age 26 to 50
   - Age 51 or more

28. EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND
   - Grammar (1-8 years)
   - High School (1-4 years)
   - College
   - Graduate

29. SIZE OF MEMBERSHIP
   - Less than 100
   - 100-499
   - 500-999
   - 1000 or more
30. **NUMBER OF YOUTH IN CONGREGATION.**
   - ☐ Less than 50
   - ☐ 51-100
   - ☐ 101-300
   - ☐ 301 or more

31. **ANNUAL INCOME**
   - ☐ $1,999
   - ☐ $10,000-49,999
   - ☐ $50,999-99,999
   - ☐ $100,000 and over

*THANK YOU VERY MUCH!*