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An Ever Present Help: Black Megachurch Cultural Responses to Conflict

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Abstract Megachurches are some of the more enigmatic members of the contemporary religious market. Moreover, because of their substantial human and economic resources, they have been described in certain mainstream religious circles as indomitable forces that seem impervious to problems. Few academic studies consider how such churches experience and confront conflict - particularly among Black megachurches. Cultural Theory and content analysis inform this ethnographic analysis of sixteen Black megachurches, centering three large-scale cases of conflict and responses. The analysis seeks to answer the following two questions: what types of conflict did the sample churches experience and were cultural tools associated with the historic Black Church used to address challenges? Results show that a toolkit associated with the traditional Black Church that includes prophetic biblical ideology, self-help, a linked-fate stance, and prayer is employed to combat contestation and promote social action. Despite their ease appropriating spiritual and secular cultural tools, findings also illustrate the potential and real negative repercussions, both internal and external, when Black megachurches are confronted by cultural lag and long-held oppositional cultural traditions in the Black community.

Keywords Black Megachurch, Conflict, Cultural Theory

1. Introduction

Studies suggest that the megachurch is a religious response to modernity, globalization, and Christian consumerism ([32], [42], [50]). Moreover, the substantial human and economic resources of large Black churches suggest their formidable stabilizing role in Black communities as well as models of spiritual and temporal success ([26], [45]). Few studies have considered the types of conflict Black megachurches experience, how they attempt to resolve such dilemmas, and implications for their considerable constituent base. This paucity in research on Black megachurch conflict seems to be indicative of a broader tendency for Black churches in general to avoid airing their "dirty laundry" despite continued contestation about controversial subjects such as sexuality, gender roles, and homosexuality ([1], [13], [20], [22], [55]). Difficulty combating such challenges, in addition to resulting church cleavages, may undermine the spiritual, political, economic, and social influence of these large collectives both in the larger society and the Black community. Despite several seminal case studies on Black megachurches ([26], [33]), research tends to focus on White evangelicalism ([21], [50]); thus this former collective is relatively under-investigated. The current study concentrates on Black megachurch conflict and how church cultural tools are used to respond to it. Church contestation among predominately White churches has been documented ([4], [9]). Despite mainstream attention to the alleged financial crises and/or sexual improprieties among several Black megachurches ([10], [24], [25], [53]), to my knowledge, an empirical examination of their experiences with conflict has not been undertaken.

1.1. Objectives

Based on Cultural Theory and ethnographic data from sixteen Black megachurches,[1] I focus on two research questions. The first will uncover largely descriptive results - what types of conflict, internal and/or external, did the Black megachurches under study experience? The second more inductive question is - do some of their major conflicts and responses speak to historic Black Church periods of contestation when tools from its cultural repertoire such as prophetic biblical ideologies[2], a linked-fate stance, prayer, self-help, and non-violent activism were most apparent? I contend that the nature of the three scenarios of *extreme* contestation examined here and their varied outcomes will help illumine how historic Black Church cultural tools are implemented in contemporary spaces and their possible effectiveness.

This endeavor does not examine the universe of Black

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megachurches or even every aspect of those under study. I intentionally focus specific theoretical and empirical lenses on how Black megachurches harness certain cultural tools to combat sanctions. The current study may be revealing given the tendency in some mainstream religious circles to position Black megachurches and their leaders as bastions of spiritual acumen, health, and wealth – and seemingly impervious to problems ([26], [32], [33], [54]). Examining types of major conflict, their sources, and solutions may also be informative for organizational studies on religion. Studying how unfavorable and potentially devastating situations are confronted by churches touted as *social forces* in their own right could also provide academic and applied information about how religious groups negotiate difficulties and church dynamics that facilitate or stymie the process.

2. Cultural Theory: Examining Black Megachurch Conflict and Black Church Culture

Cultural Theory provides a robust model to assess how religious groups use tangible and intangible devices to understand experiences and accomplish objectives. Use of this framework to study organizations is not novel. However, I broach new terrain by examining Black megachurches as sites of contestation and usage of cultural tools associated with the historic Black Church to remedy conflict. The framework situates culture as the linchpin between group meanings and motivations. This study is informed by Swidler's ([48]) specific lens and definition of a cultural repertoire or "tool kit" as "symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories, and rituals of daily life" (273). Black Church cultural tools such as rituals, songs, prayer, and biblical stories have been shown to help adherents understand situations, develop goals, and harness resources ([3], [34], [43]). Such tools can also move beyond their original religious import and influence activism ([41]). Swidler's ([46], [47]) premise that culture can transform undeveloped beliefs, language, and expressions into specific objectives based on context requires one to evaluate the relationship between church culture, meaning, and praxis based on congregational milieu. Yet it is unclear whether and how traditional church cultural tools translate for megachurches known for non-traditionally re-appropriating spiritual and secular language, rituals, music, and beliefs to "push the envelope" on what is considered sacred ([33], [51], [54]). The ability to provide "materials from which individuals and groups construct strategies of action" ([48]: 280) was evident during and after slavery ([15], [41], [59]); thus it is important to consider their usage when Black megachurches face challenges. Will Swidler's ([46], [47], [48]) differential understanding of cultural usage during unsettled and settled periods manifest? What existential wounds emerged and how were they addressed? These queries will help apply this specific lens of Cultural Theory to the Black megachurch context.

As expected, people understand and use culture differently on a daily basis; "dismissing, criticizing, or filtering the culture with which we come in contact... appropriating some and using them to build a life, holding others in reserve, and keeping still others permanently at a distance" ([46]: 15, 19). This fluidity can result in a plethora of meanings, frames, and judgments on which people draw that become particularly salient and apparent when confronted by unexpected, difficult, or new situations. As people "practice" culture in settings such as churches, it also enables them to continually use and act on these tools in everyday life. Yet such institutions can become problematic when followers embrace cultural tools without fully understanding their implications. Swidler ([46]) describes the specific influence of ideology: "when groups construct new strategies of action, they do so through ideologies…They provide guidelines for action and have strong, direct influence on their adherents. They also supply rituals, symbols, and worldviews that teach adherents a new ethos and new ways of acting in the world. Those who are learning the cultural supports for a new strategy of action may strictly follow the ideology as they try to establish patterns of action that are unfamiliar or are in contention with competing ideological systems…but their ultimate effects on action are often limited, because wider structural and historical factors determine how ideologies fare against competitors" (107).

I consider whether and how ideology can facilitate new strategies of action or foster conflict when confronted by pre-existing belief systems. According to Swidler, the effects of cultural lag cannot be underestimated "because [people] are reluctant to discard familiar strategies of action for which they already have the cultural equipment" ([46]: 105).

2.1. Black Church Cultural Tools, Usage, and Processes

Although they do not exhaust its repertoire, I consider the influences of four cultural tools associated with the Black Church tradition: prophetic biblical ideology; self-help; non-violent activism; and, prayer, as well as the role of charismatic clergy as mediators for their usage. A focus on these tools seems particularly germane given their ability to tie other-worldly beliefs to this-worldly outcomes and their historic connection to religious responses to Black community problems ([3], [12]). *The Negro Church*, DuBois ([19]) both chronicles and critiques this religious mainstay in terms of social action, education, and missions. Subsequent research describes the Black Church self-help tradition that included mutual aid associations, prison ministries, and job training programs ([3], [34]). And driven by community-activist pastors, well-resourced Black churches organize schools, community centers, and credit unions ([7], [52]). These tangible efforts are also correlated with a work ethic that encourages frugality, enterprise, and self-initiative based on: biblical ideological edicts such as "if any would not work, neither should he eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10) and

stories of Old Testament patriarchs who succeeded despite dire circumstances.

Historic social action tended to focus on: righting historic wrongs against Blacks and other disenfranchised groups; political advocacy; and, mobilization via marches and boycotts. Although certain self-help initiatives were short-term survivalist programs, activism also reflected long-range efforts to challenge the status quo, often fueled by a prophetic biblical ideology that links salvation to activism, unconventional service, and a model of a selfless Christ ([15], [29], [34]). A strong argument can be made that the Black Church cultural tool kit was most apparent during the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) when clergy, songs, scripture, and prayer fostered both self-help and non-violent social action (Morris 1984). And whether individually or collectively, prayer was used to: preface religious and secular events; communicate with God; and, receive validation before challenging events ([11], [37], [41], [43], [58]). Linsk and Warner ([35]) also illustrate use of such tools, particularly during hardship: "Their personal religiosity is culturally defined, anchored in the traditional African American Christian tradition. Their accounts were filled with unmistakable Christian imagery and Biblical allusions…about King Jesus, their Precious Savior, and the God who tirelessly watches over them…when African Americans turn to religion…they do so out of a context of familiarity with religious symbols and practices" (239).

Many of the above examples of self-help, group initiative, and social involvement were championed by charismatic Black Church clergy who mediate between cultural tools and the people they hope will convert them into strategies of action. They relay church culture ([41], [43]) as they provide prayers, songs, sermons, stories, and poems to equip, educate, and stimulate social action. By modeling Christian lifestyles and rallying adherents, clergy endeavor to promote self-efficacy and collective empowerment ([12], [15], [29], [41], [59]).

In sum, Black Church cultural tools can: reinforce one's intrinsic worth; foster shared values and confidence in a just God; engender belief in victory over seemingly insurmountable odds; be used to confront the status quo; motivate action; and, facilitate communication with God ([29], [41], [58]). It would be incorrect to suggest that these church tools are the only mechanisms by which strategies of action occur or that they are always effective. Yet studies provide strong evidence that they are an indelible part of the Black Church tradition and have been intentionally used in response to conflict. But are they apparent and effective among *Black megachurches* when they face conflict? Because Black megachurches have a reputation for drawing on religious and secular cultural tools as well as challenging "conventional" Christian wisdom, it remains unclear whether they will rely on tools such as prophetic biblical ideology, self-help, non-violent activism, and prayer associated with the historic Black Church and, if so, the manner in which such appropriation will occur.

2.2. The Black Megachurch Phenomena

Megachurches are generally defined as congregations that have an average of 2,000 attendees during weekend worship services ([27], [50]). By extension, Black megachurches have predominately Black memberships, Black pastors, and worship elements from the Black Church tradition. Although the Black megachurch definition varies and is often debated ([45], [54]), such churches date back to the early 1900s ([23], [45]). There are an estimated 120-150 of them today, disproportionately located in Texas, Georgia, and Florida. Common features include multiple, energetic, hi-tech, televised worship services as well as large paid and volunteer staff ([26], [32], [51], [54]). Although some are most recognized for their pastors ([33], [54]), other Black megachurches are gaining reputations for sponsoring cafeteria-style programs to both proselytize and meet temporal needs ([23], [52]). Yet some Black megachurches are accused of: failing to help the poor; focusing on Prosperity theology; requiring excessive monetary and time commitments of members; and, pilfering church coffers for the pastor's personal use ([10], [26], [32], [40]). Some writers challenge these detractors ([50]); others describe negative experiences among megachurches ([24], [25], [53]). The latter dynamics are the focus of the current study.

2.3. Black Church Conflict

This paucity of systematic research on Black Church conflict may be attributed to a failure by academics to concertedly examine the subject as well as the tendency by Black Church leaders to avoid publicizing "dirty laundry". In the earliest study on Black religiosity, DuBois ([19]) problemitizes Black Church progress by critiquing uneducated pastors with questionable ethics and program effectiveness. He also describes inter-societal conflict due to chronic racism and discrimination fostered by supposedly Christian Whites and tacitly accepted by complicitous Blacks. Later, writers describe internal conflict as members no longer blindly adhere to pastoral dictates - particularly formally educated, middle class Blacks who now require more than "fire and brimstone" preaching ([34], [38]). Tensions also arise as members question the need for extreme volunteerism and financial donations, especially when it appears that they are not benefitting as promised ([26]) and based on incongruent views about whether the pulpit should be used politically ([33], [34]). Disagreements can also occur about: worship styles ([16]); community action ([39]); and, denominational and theological schisms ([38]). Moreover, disparate views about women leaders and homosexuality are deeply entrenched in Black religiosity. Supporters for women clerics refer to specific biblical examples of women in key leadership roles; detractors suggest that the bible prohibits women to have authority over men ([2], [33], [38]). Black churches are also accused of welcoming closeted homosexuals as individuals, but not affirming them collectively ([1], [13], [20], [22], [55]). When megachurches are considered, outsiders are critical of

congestion, cults of personality, priestliness, and "sheep stealing" – yet the Black experience is only tangentially discussed ([50]). Regardless of church size, reasons for the above types of conflict are linked to denominationalism and differences in ideologies, values, and norms. Moreover, such conflict has been linked to psychological stresses, ill feelings among congregants, church splits, and the exodus of Blacks from historically Black religious traditions ([38]). Despite their potential volatility, limited research exists about how these issues actually play out over time in Black churches in general and among Black megachurches in particular. Few studies include details, resolutions, or repercussions. Work on church conflict either excludes or minimally references Black churches ([4], [9]). As compared to their smaller peers, factors such as size, human and economic resources, and theological stances ([26], [33]) may mean that some Black megachurches understand and respond to conflict differently. This study will advance our knowledge on the Black megachurch experience when dramatic challenges arise.

3. Methods

This ethnographic analysis is based on sixteen Black megachurches. Data[3] were amassed over a five year period in the mid-2000s and included sixteen in-depth clergy interviews, surveys, thirty pastors' sermons (video and/or audio), and participant observation.[4] Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to several hours. Extensive field notes were taken based on participant observation at each locale over a 2-3 day period during which I toured surrounding neighborhoods and church facilities such as schools, family life centers, bookstores, and housing complexes as well as attended multiple Sunday worship services. More recent newsprint data augment these academic sources. This analysis relies on clergy interviews, secondary data, participant observation, and informal conversations with members during participant observation.[5] During interviews, clergy answered questions about church demographics, ideology, programs, and experiences. The small sample size and non-random selection process preclude generalizability of these findings; yet this is not the project goal. I contend that the study's strength lies in the ability to provide an in-depth examination of some of the contextual and congregational dynamics from which conflicted situations emerged and the subsequent Black Church cultural tools used in attempts to remedy them. In addition to contextual descriptions, content analysis was used to identify common church cultural tools and responses to conflict. This approach included a close reading and analysis of the data to identify: meanings; common, emergent themes; and, response frequencies often overlooked by other methods ([18], [30]).

The following summary contextualizes the study. For the sake of parsimony, I focus on broad demographics (i.e., average size, locale, affiliation, and leadership format) and clergy traits. First, the vast majority of the sixteen Black churches meet the standard megachurch definition.[6] Average church attendance ranges from about 1,375 persons each week to over 25,000. The average church membership is 8,039 persons. Fifty-percent of them are affiliated with the Baptist tradition; they tend to be located in urban spaces (56%) rather than in suburban (37.5%) or rural (6.25%) locales. Three-quarters of them can be considered class diverse. However, two churches have predominately middle and upper-class memberships and two memberships are predominately working class or poor. Eleven of the churches have a male senior pastor; one has a female senior pastor; and, four have husband and wife co-pastors. Niche groups such as age-specific bible studies and children's programs as well as family-oriented events appear to be one response to potential isolation and anonymity. Lastly, about three-quarters of them sponsor 40 or more programs or ministries.

4. Results

Conflict and Black Church Cultural Tools

Periods of conflict can motivate group members to mobilize and concretize their purpose. Equally possible, contestation can cause devastating effects when infighting and outside forces whittle away at the collective ([4], [9], [38]). Major problems were uncommon; for the thirteen churches not profiled here, clergy described conflict associated with misunderstandings and stereotypes about megachurches in general, early membership growth spurts, and social problems such as community poverty. Yet these types of problems were considered somewhat expected, manageable, and part of a congregation's responsibility to address. However, three clerics discussed large-scale conflict that is summarily different from other examples in terms of nature, scope, response strategies, and long-term outcomes. In these instances, Black megachurch pastors believed their churches were acting in the best interest of congregants and community members to promote self-efficacy, social justice, and empowerment. Yet the outcomes resulted in unexpected tensions and turmoil – several with devastating long-term effects. Each case study below was selected for analysis because it evidences outcomes when Black megachurches *moved against* pre-existing cultural, social, and/or political norms. In addition to illustrating the influence and effects of church cultural lag as well as strain when cultural beliefs from the broader Black community conflict with church tools, the scenarios demonstrate usage of cultural components associated with the historic Black Church to combat conflict and attempt to restore community.

4.1. Stigma in Response to Social Action (Mt. Canaan Pentecostal Church)

Mt. Canaan is a 6,000 member Pentecostal church located in the "heart of Ward 5". The urban locale is 94% Black and has been historically plagued by double-digit poverty rates,

single parent homes, and a median annual household income of just over $20,000. Yet Mt. Canaan has experienced steady growth since it was founded in 1966 by senior pastor Joshua Moore, at 19 years of age with seven members in a storefront, and is now considered the largest Pentecostal church on the east coast. In addition to multiple worship services featuring exuberant singing, dancing, glossolalia, and prophesying, Mt. Canaan has a long history of community service. In response to the local *resource desert*, it built a Family Life Center that features: a 300-seat auditorium; a dance studio; computer lab; weight and fitness room; game room; saunas; barbershop and hairstyling salon; kid's sports room; classrooms; 4-lane bowling alley; and, rooftop basketball and tennis courts. Needy persons can also get free food and gently-used clothes at the church's grocery store and boutique, respectively. Other cafeteria-style programs include: GED classes; employment training; entrepreneurial programs; referral services; and, a Christian academy. Funded by government grants and member donations, CANAAN House was created in 1983 as a free, confidential full-service drug and alcohol center that provides counseling, drug intervention and prevention services, 12-step programs, and referrals. Mt. Canaan has received numerous awards as a result of its efforts to arrest substance abuse. Based on their history of social action in poor areas, Pastor Moore assumed that the community would welcome the drug intervention/ prevention program. To his chagrin, their efforts were not initially met with support:

"I've been pastoring 41 years and we were the first church in [name of city] to start a drug and alcohol ministry. So we had a stigma with that because the community that we were in before this was in the heart of the ghetto and we started embracing drug addicts and alcoholics…So they [people outside the immediate community] began to say then, 'If you want to get some drugs, go up to [church name]'. So we were stigmatized by that - we weathered that."

Widespread crack, marijuana, and heroin problems provided the sobering context for Pastor Moore's belief that the community would appreciate their efforts to combat the drug pandemic. An ideological edict enabled the church to withstand intra-racial biases based on class and space: "Jesus said, 'when I was hungry, you didn't feed me, outdoors, you didn't take me in, imprisoned, you didn't visit me.' So we believe that the Church's main mission [emphasis is his] is to go outside of the four walls and be community based. So we devised programs based on the needs in the community and how we can address those needs."

This paraphrased version of Matthew 25 underscores a Social Gospel message of social action and program provision as a sign of Christly commitment ([31], [44]). By presenting Christ as the model to be emulated, their ideology also becomes embedded in a servanthood model that provides the requisite motivation and intestinal fortitude to endure trials. To a certain degree, all churches serve. Yet the above two statements reflect a prophetic stance by: *embracing* and serving the disenfranchised; attempting to *center* their experiences to minimize paternalism; and, creating an environment where they are socially accepted *and* required to be actively involved in their empowerment ([15], [34]).

According to Pastor Moore, prudence dictates that the Black community take responsibility for its problems. Moreover, the needy should be considered people with problems rather than problem people ([56]). Thus after a church-wide drug education and awareness program, they embarked on what he considers a life-long ministry. Successful outcomes, supported by paid and volunteer staff and grants, seemed to waylay naysayers and position the church to respond to another chronic problem in the Black community - HIV/AIDS. Yet again they experienced similar detractors. However, unlike the initial conflict, these problems were initially internal: "In starting the AIDS ministry there was some reluctance in the congregation because people thought that if you were starting an AIDS ministry, you were starting it for people with AIDS [inside the church] and therefore they did not want to be attached - so that while they might have some sense of compassion, they did not want to be connected with it because they felt that they [emphasis his], in fact, were the victims of it…we had to get past that." Pastor Moore invokes another scripture to respond to initial reticence among members: "I see AIDS today the way Jesus had to deal with lepers in the bible….that was a disease that they didn't know where it came from…and Jesus embraced the lepers and healed the lepers – and yet in society they were cast out."

By framing the HIV/AIDS pandemic using a New Testament example of an ostracized group Christ empathized with, welcomed, and cared for, the pastor strategically extends the servanthood model to issues of HIV/AIDS in a manner to which members could understand and relate. This approach also created a strategic *safe space* for members to initially become comfortable before embarking on what many considered a controversial, daunting effort. Moreover, Christ's healing of lepers provided the spiritual and ideological impetus for the strategies of action that resulted in an organized, comprehensive HIV/AIDS program ([46]). Yet city-wide conflict ensued: "Then when we started dealing with HIV/AIDS, we were on the cutting edge of that and we had speakers to come in and educate the church….So then they said, 'if you want to go to a gay church, go to [church name]. So we weathered that."

A reputation ensued that Mt. Canaan was facilitating immorality rather than providing a needed service. Proactively responding to social ills that impact a disproportionate percentage of Blacks did not ingratiate this church in the broader, largely middle and upper class Black community, but rather precipitated stigma, negative labeling, and ostracism ([4], [13], [20]). Yet the credibility and longevity of the pastor as an activist, the success of pre-existing cafeteria-style programs, educational awareness, and support from a class-diverse membership fortifies their tenacity and provides a contemporary example of intra-racial social activism called for by academics ([13], [14], [20]).

Yet if a resource - replete megachurch can experience

such contestation, their smaller peers may be all the more reluctant to initiate similar programs. Mt. Canaan also combines the evangelical thrust for which megachurches are known ([50]) with a self-help, linked fate stance from the Black Church cultural tradition: "You work with what He gives you. He didn't give us a church full of doctors and lawyers. We have them now, but I started with 7 people in a storefront. And I had no idea of the age of 19, when I started the ministry, I'd have 7,000 members on roll….But He gave me the compassion and it was slow growth, but it was sure growth…many of the officers who serve here as deacons, trustees, deaconesses, came from either drug abuse, alcoholism, some type of sexual promiscuous lifestyle and now they've been cleaned up, converted, and they help me run the ministry."

His remark includes biblical imagery that informs his openness to a diverse demographic as well as his understanding of vocation, what constitutes Christian community service, and God's ultimate control of the process. The cyclical process also assumes that subordinated groups bring cultural capacities to the table to eventually become central parts of effective service ([46], [47], [48]).

Because people "selectively appropriate and use cultural meanings" ([46]: 22), certain cultural tools continue to be persuasive over time, while others lose their ability to persuade. Pastor Moore's ability to champion the cause of HIV/AIDS was, in part, due to his ability to establish a connection between this social problem and chronic challenges associated with substance abuse and poverty in the Black community. Furthermore, prophetic biblical ideology associated with servanthood and Christ's extreme, unconditional concern for lepers provided the Christian script necessary to persuade a skeptical congregation that an HIV/AIDS ministry was the right thing to do *and* merely a continuation of the cafeteria-style programs they already sponsor. Moreover, because action is inherently situational, rules and habits associated with action are based on assumptions about the appropriate situation in which a particular action should occur. In this case, although members were initially reticent about starting both a drug intervention/prevention center and later an HIV/AIDS program, the actual situations (i.e., the church's long-time involvement in social action as well as the reality that these social problems disproportionately existed in their area) fostered a space where new strategies of action were accepted and implemented. Furthermore, because "people organize action over time [and] individual actions do not make sense by themselves, but only as parts of larger patterns" ([46]:82), Mt. Canaan's prior pattern of successes sponsoring programs for oppressed groups helped shape a pattern of church behavior such that new, controversial endeavors, like an HIV/AIDS program, seemed like an appropriate extension of their mission. Lastly, a servanthood framing of a Social Gospel message reflects a synthesis of Black Church cultural tools including: the Servant-Savior model of Christ; a self-help tradition; a linked-fate perspective; prophetic biblical passages; and, a non-traditional view of historically oppressed groups and their potential ([7], [31], [34], [44]). For Mt. Canaan, successfully weathering *storms* associated with stigma provides further evidence of God's favor on their purpose and programs.

4.2. The Costs of Inclusivity (Valiant Non-Denominational Church)

Founded in 1987 by Pastor Devin Smith, Valiant Church sits on a 25 acre campus in the suburbs of a racially heterogeneous southern city. Its class-diverse membership has been as high as 7,000 persons. Valiant has a history of involvement in economic and political matters including their pastor's long-time political posts. Although non-denominational, the church was historically Baptist, but Pastor Smith's upbringing in the Church of God in Christ is evident in his preaching and their neo-Pentecostal worship. Among its cafeteria-style programs include a Christian Academy, Valiant Church has a nationwide reputation as one of few predominately Black welcoming and affirming churches.[7]

This transition is the source of conflict examined here. The pastor describes initially, intentionally avoiding the controversial issues of sexism and homophobia in the Black Church in order to evade the inevitable conflict ([1], [2], [4], [20], [55]). The process initially involved resolving his own personal tensions based on an unexamined life in a conservative religious space ([46]): "I kind of went through stages. Actually I was one of those homophobic preachers that I now like to engage. I was because it was a part of my tradition. I was actually raised in a more conservative church…I was raised COGIC…In that upbringing - there's right, there's wrong…there's good, there's evil, there's sin, there's righteousness And you draw the line and you hold that line and you do not waiver one iota. Because we were taught that holiness is not going to come down to you - you've got to come up to holiness…To be sure it was a 'works-righteousness' theology –I didn't realize it at the time but we were really proving ourselves worthy enough to be called the children of God by all the things we refrain from [emphasis is his]."

Having been socialized based on an ideology that emphasized: strict religious hygiene; a dichotomous understanding of human behavior; and, a priestly rather than prophetic focus ([34]), Pastor Smith was forced to contend with the inherently social nature of church culture and the resulting strategies of action associated with guilt and rituals to reinforce loyalty and obligation. Outside his family and home church's conservative religious purview, he was able to distance himself emotionally, ritualistically, and socially from that cultural tradition and gradually embrace another: "I went from, 'I'm not going to deal with that' [inclusivity and social justice] because I'm trying to grow my church to well, I realize it's a problem, it's a living contradiction in terms of…what I know about what conservative religion does to people who are marginalized whether it be Black people, women, gays and lesbians, immigrants, handicapped,

anybody…But I got to a point where I couldn't have any integrity knowing that I was being silent about issues that were…keeping people outside looking in."

Given his own resolution, he assumed members would gradually respond similarly: "If you stick within the conservative party line, then you can grow by leaps and bounds. Now when you step outside the party lines, there's going to be some resistance. And that's what I did. I stepped out of the party lines… I began to reclaim and explore the Social Gospel dimension of everything that I was preaching…Now we don't get anywhere as oppressed classes of people by setting ourselves up over and against other oppressed classes. Dr. King tried to tell us that and that's a lesson we have not learned yet…I don't think we've learned that our condoning of sexism and homophobia in the Black Church contradicts the whole Civil Rights legacy of the Black Church…It kind of raised a few eyes. Some people said, 'Mmm, Pastor is getting more political now' but they could live with that. You know. 'Dr. King OK, Civil Rights, OK, we can go with that'…And then I took it a step further by saying that, if we really are going to be about the Gospel of Jesus, who was no respecter of persons in terms of person's gender, then…I do not want women to be excluded. We will have women deacons."

Reaching this ideological impasse meant breaking denominational ties as well as reclaiming the Social Gospel perspective he learned in seminary. By embedding a new charge for gender role inclusivity with biblical ideology and social justice imagery from the CRM that resonated with many members, he "emphasizes that Christians are [should be] different by suggesting that their faith can resolve the personal difficulties that baffle others… [and] to define away troublesome experiences" ([46]: 65). Breaking tradition also meant confronting the belief that some Black men *and* women embrace that Black male church leadership is an appropriate response to their historic emasculation in society and that gender complimentarity rather than equality is warranted ([2]).

Similarly to Becker's ([4]) findings among "leader model" churches where members' undue reliance on pastoral authority can assuage divisiveness, successfully cultivating these new cultural capacities around gender inclusivity encouraged additional change and subsequent large-scale conflict: "So I'm going to press the envelope a little further now by saying, 'In addition to equality between men and women, we ought to be breaking down the homophobic barriers that divide people along the lines of sexual orientation'…I did not expect quite the negative reaction."

Pastor Smith relied on incrementally exposing the congregation to two forms of inclusion, expecting time lags would foster greater acceptability. However, it may be argued that sufficient time was not provided for church members to adjust to the dramatically new circumstances given the routinized understandings about gender roles and sexual minorities that are doubly entangled in cultural tools from both the Black Church and Black community ([20], [22], [33], [55]). Pastor Smith incorrectly believed that the radical example of Christ's inclusivity as modeled in a Social Gospel message, coupled with his pastoral influence would insure success because most members would follow suit. His latter remark points to pending backlash because "persons available strategies of action shape the kind of goals he or she pursues, instead of the other way around" ([46]: p. 83). This means that, although Pastor Smith and certain members may have had the cultural capacity to follow his proposed inclusive strategies, many members did not. This latter group was unable to reconcile their religious- and community-based conservative cultural beliefs about sexual minorities with the pastor's prophetic challenge.

The former action caused some congregant concerns among males *and* females who espoused traditional gender roles; yet they were assuaged by strategic use of cultural tools associated with the historic Black Church, CRM, and increased ecclesiastical acceptance of women clergy (Becker 1999). However, the latter resulted in mass exodus of about half the membership for reasons the pastor attributes to: fear; homophobia; women's concerns about loss of potential mates; leaders' concerns about community stigma; apprehension about its influence on children; and, conservative biblical ideology. Despite membership fallout and negative community attention, this pastor contends that their actions were godly sanctioned and thus ultimately successful: "Everyday is a faith walk…I was saying, 'Now God, if this means I can't be the pastor of a megachurch and if it means that we have to give up our facilities for the sake of the Gospel, I'm willing to do it.' And when I came to that point, God began to move. And as I say, we're still here, through it all - and getting stronger… and people still come... And God is to be praised. God gets all the credit. But I was able to remain steadfast in that conviction…One of the things that crisis did was help me to invite people into dialogue about the meaning of text [the bible] and the meaning of our witness as we interpret the text as people of God in our contemporary times. And so we've had discussions that we never would have had prior to that about sexuality…and for us to really understand what being a family of God [emphasis is his] is all about."

Despite the exodus of half the congregation, the resulting sexual diversity at Valiant Church illustrates how a set of cultural capacities were mobilized to foster a new strategy of action relative to inclusivity. According to Pastor Smith, the church is smaller in size, but spiritually stronger. He also believes God's intervention was precipitated by his initial leap of faith to re-think beliefs about heterosexism and gender discrimination, proactively create welcoming spaces, open influential church positions to excluded groups, expand the definition of family, and foster increased communication. I posit that his considerable charisma and linked fate perspective ([33], [54]) are evident in the ability to convince 3,000 members to supplant the church's conservative ideology and denominational ties. Historic experiences of racism, sexism, and discrimination provided the needed bridging to frame exclusivity as a civil rights violation made all the more egregious by its existence inside church walls

([5], [6]).

In contrast to Mt. Canaan's generally favorable outcome, Pastor Smith was unable to convince half of his membership to extend a Social Gospel message into new cultural territory. Despite their church's long-time involvement in social justice programs and politics, its conflict and limited resolution illustrate the volatile nature of cultural lag because "cultural systems are vulnerable to drastic change…and individuals are receptive to new experiences and new ways of framing meaning at some times and not others" ([46]: 22). Applying this premise, due to the social nature of culture, certain members were unable to embrace openly gay members because previous cultural dictates had not warranted it - but had actually cultivated and fortified an oppositional stance. For them, exiting was their only recourse ([4]). Based on the considerable exodus, it seems logical to ask whether Pastor Smith's cultural capacities outpaced those of the departing members. Did he move too fast in his efforts to cultivate inclusivity? His attempts to transform certain cultural traditions meant that he was fighting some of the same cultural dictates that had fortified the church, created solidarity, and defined group identity. A substantial number of members left disillusioned, confused, and saddened because their belief systems had been dismantled and a spiritual "safe space" was now foreign. One might argue that Pastor Smith assuaged the existential wounds of one set of members at the expense of another ([46]).

4.3. "Family Values" March Gone Afoul (New Beginnings Baptist Church)

The final scenario provides a contrasting example of extra-church conflict resulting from a charismatic pastor's strategic use of self-help and activism in the spirit of the CRM; how Black Church cultural tools were employed by his allies; and, how tools from the larger Black community were used for and against the church. With origins back to 1939, New Beginnings is one of the largest Black megachurches in the country. The over 250-acre church campus consists of a $50 million dollar complex. It sponsors well over 40 ministries as well as international evangelism and missions programs. The church also has a reputation for sponsoring conferences for demographic niches. Pastor Donald Davis' business background is evident in the church's emphasis on entrepreneurial initiatives, job training, and economic advancement; moreover, his vision for Black families and children inform many of their ministries including the New Beginnings Christian Academy. It appears that the context for subsequent troubles was laid when, despite an annual budget that rivals some corporations and a litany of cafeteria-style programs, New Beginnings elected to disband its HIV/AIDS ministry: "We don't have a specific HIV ministry. With our hospital ministry, which we call our Visitation Ministry…we strive not only to serve people with cancer or people recovering from surgery, but even HIV/AIDS patients…we did have a specific AIDS ministry, but through some various challenges and things, we had to disband that part of the ministry, but then we encompass everything that we do through our regular Visitation Ministry."

According to a clergy representative, despite previously instrumental responses to the pandemic, the church now primarily offers expressive support: "[Pastor's name] does have a concern for those that are marginalized with HIV/AIDS. Oftentimes, as you know, families will neglect relatives, so we have been admonished several times as a congregation, if anyone ever comes before the church congregation and shares a testimony, 'I'm HIV positive or can you pray for me, I'm dealing with AIDS' that we are compelled and commanded to surround them with the love of Christ, to embrace them like we would embrace anyone else, to keep them encouraged in the Word of the Lord, and to stand with them."

Yet the seemingly limited nature of their efforts is informed by belief in the far-reaching effects of prayer ([2], [11]), a linked fate ideology, and unconditional affection that models Christ ([34], [58]). And in so doing, this cleric contends that New Beginnings offers HIV/AIDS victims and their families "inner resources and a sense of resilience" ([35]: 237) that are largely priestly in nature. Despite his vagueness about the circumstances surrounding the ministry's demise, participant observation results suggest Pastor Davis' concerns that an HIV/AIDS ministry might suggest that New Beginnings condones homosexuality and divert attention from their family- and child-centeredness. It would appear that this inter-church decision, in isolation, would not have resulted in community conflict.

However, New Beginnings' decision to sponsor a "family-values" march in 2004 precipitated community-wide suspicions that Pastor Davis condoned homophobia: "We did a march…three years ago… about same sex marriage… about 10 thousand of the congregation… just to let them know, 'No, we're not against gays and lesbians, we are pro-family.' And what pro-family means is yes, a man and a woman, male and female, coming together as God has ordained to establish families. We welcome homosexuals into our church. However, we also teach that like any sin… God has a higher calling on our lives."

The above comment speaks to the tendency to conflate HIV/AIDS with homosexuality and sin and to believe that homosexuality undermines Black families ([1]). The cleric's unprompted need to justify the march and explain its non-homophobic focus also alludes to the resulting conflict. Yet the impetus behind both decisions can be attributed to the far-reaching influence of the charismatic senior pastor and his focus on two dominant, potentially problematic themes Walton ([54]) associates with Black televangelists, "economic advancement…and Victorian ideals of the family" (p. 15). The cleric continues: "For as long as I've been here, one of Bishop [name] passions is youth…I think he has always had a focus on youth, especially now with the number of single parent households in the Black community, that is a great concern of his. Also, Bishop comes from a

business background, corporate experiences with Fortune 500 companies…so he keeps encouraging and setting the vision before the congregation that you don't necessarily have to work for someone, but God has gifted you with tremendous gifts and talents where you can establish your own businesses for generational wealth…So I'd say youth and businesses would be two overarching themes."

The senior pastor's emphasis on self-efficacy, family/child centeredness, and Black economic advancement parallel a historic Black Church toolkit ([8], [19], [28]). However, these tools are strategically fused with Prosperity theology such that they undergird a contemporary ideological catalyst for *extreme* expectations of success and re-establishment of the nuclear Black family with males in their rightful places as leaders. This stance is: "Moral in scope and romantic in outlook…to cope with otherwise grim aspects of a society…appeals to the cultural myths of American success…and the Strong Black Man legitimate conservative and anecdotally based views of wealth distribution…and gender hierarchy" ([54]: 15-16).

And by following these imperatives, adherents position themselves for godly favor in the form of spiritual and temporal successes ([26]). Furthermore, the visible economic accoutrements and nuclear families of the senior pastor, other key clergy, and lay leaders validated the church's ideology - and made support of the march more palatable. Although Black Church protests and marches are less common, a large church contingency took part in the activity framed as a non-violent protest to encourage self-efficacious responses to the plight of the Black family and its children ([5]). This scenario also illustrates the implications of limited cultural coherence when people have difficulty reconciling disparate moral viewpoints. In this instance, some church members seemed unable to reconcile the complexities of the "family values" debate largely because doing so had not been part of their necessary kit of cultural competencies. And upon being confronted, they reverted to pre-existing cultural competencies tied to a commonsense use of a conservative Christian script that has been associated with homophobia and exclusion ([22], [55]). However, use of a non-violent march taps into cultural competencies tied to the CRM; yet contestation arose from *outside* contingencies that rejected the church's claim that civil rights are distinct from gay rights ([20]).

Swidler's ([46]) understanding of unexamined use of culture is germane here when "boundary separates specifically Christian from non-Christian conduct…details of daily life…mark that boundary…defined by adherence to traditional morality, which emphasizes the importance of a stable marriage and the priority of family life" (p. 62). The church's ideology of family, although long-standing in the Black community, is also part of a broader cultural context in this diverse city that put it "in active competition with other cultural frameworks…with alternative traditions and ideologies" ([46]: 102). Thus New Beginnings experienced backlash precipitated by persons: from a city that has a disproportionate percentage of Black gays and lesbians, and their allies; who were suspicious of megachurches in general; and, who were mistrustful of the overarching authority and motivations of the senior pastor.

Because cultural tools and strategies of action are influenced by social milieu and the historical context of that space, it is doubtful that the march would have resulted in similar repercussions had it occurred in most other U.S. cities. Controversy and negative media attention aside, the march was in the spirit of the CRM ([41], [57]). Yet its political, sexual, as well as religious nature and large-scale cultural clashes meant that, despite being a leader of a 25,000 member, largely middle-class church, this pastor's considerable influence was insufficient to shield him and the church from accusations of homophobia or international, national and local backlash from other clergy, churches, and persons from mainstream society. Several years later, accusations of sexual indiscretions by Pastor Davis seemed to further fuel far-reaching disdain for him and his church; vocal allies seemed difficult to locate. However, several of his Black megachurch pastoral peers expressed empathy and encouraged Christians, regardless of their views about the situation, to rely on the Black Church prayer tradition to provide solace and ultimately reveal the appropriate course of action. To outsiders, the focus on prayer as a primary remedy may seem problematic because "words themselves, along with their performative delivery, say something about the way members of the group will frame, receive, and act upon an issue" ([43]: 769). For outsiders, it suggests inaction, silence, and complicity. Yet for insiders, emphasis on prayer is informed by a hallmark belief in Black Church culture that "prayer changes things" ([11], [41]).

5. Discussion

Conflict is common in churches ([4], [9]); Black megachurches are no exception. However, I have attempted to illustrate a unique set of church cultural tools, contexts, and circumstances that compounded these megachurch conflicts and resulted in outcomes of local, national, and in some instances, international import. I posit that the conflict experienced by Black megachurches differs from that of smaller churches because the former groups have the audacity to confront challenges many other churches would avoid; they believe they are social forces in themselves, largely based on past programmatic successes and ideological stance; and, they believe they have divine support to do so ([26]). Yet, unlike their smaller peers, the fallout from their conflict can have negative repercussions of broad proportion. For example, a cursory Internet search located over one hundred articles, blogs, or user comments about one recent Black megachurch conflict in the last several months alone. Similar to the Catholic pedophile scenario, for Christians, such repercussions can result in existential wounds tied to loss of faith as well as diminished credibility in Christianity and its clergy; for outsiders, such conflict can undermine the credibility of Christianity in

general. Yet for these pastors, their godly vocations justify such involvement as they confront controversial, contested situations. Such "walks of faith" can enable churches to "weather storms" if: new cultural capacities coincide with previous ones; followers can be convinced of their cultural compatibility and ability to implement these new tools; and, social spaces support church change ([46], [47], [48]). A servanthood model combined with a Social Gospel message and the reality of social problems in their community fostered Mt. Canaan's comprehensive drug prevention/ intervention and HIV/AIDS programs. For Valiant Church, residence in a city with a disproportionately large Black gay populace, coupled with this same biblical ideology resulted in intra-church transformation - and fallout for half its members. And Prosperity theology informed conservative views about familial roles to fortify New Beginnings to withstand negative community responses to their non-violent march.

The conflict detailed here are also partly a result of group tendencies to become more self-aware of their identities and boundaries and intensify their stances when challenged by cultural change. As suggested by Becker ([4]), "congregational models do in fact provide cultural frames or lenses through which members interpret the importance of specific events and issues in local congregational life" (p. 169). For Mt. Canaan, this meant becoming comfortable serving some of the most socially and economically disenfranchised members of society by minimizing an initial "us versus them" identity. In contrast, Valiant Church lost members who refused to blur such boundaries or embrace an ideology they considered unbiblical. And although New Beginnings had fewer intra-church tensions, their social action march and subsequent negative community response fortified their boundaries between the gay/lesbian community and its allies ([46]). Furthermore, because churches tend to be ideologically driven, contestation arose when church ideology did not resonate with the common sense, everyday experiences of Blacks in each locale. Pastor Moore of Mt. Canaan was able to shore up much of the incongruence because the proposed services to the drug dependent and persons with HIV/AIDS were framed as an extension of an existing church servanthood model to the "least and left out" ([5], [6]). Similarly, thousands of New Beginnings' members marched because they had been socialized to consider the family values and same-sex marriage debate discordant. And although Pastor Smith of Valiant was able to convincingly relay a message of inclusivity to half of the members, a significant number considered it outside their long-standing cultural capacity to accept. Thus each pastor had varied levels of *success* in presenting new cultural tools as if they should be "taken for granted" by their members and/or the broader Black community.

Cultural Theory suggests that in order to cultivate new strategies of action, leaders must first learn skills, language, habits, and overall codes of conduct in order to "negotiate relations with others… [to] develop a new world view ([46]: 85-6). For several pastors here, adjusting to these new cultural parameters actually meant initially re-adjusting their own identities to "develop lines of action based on who they already think they are" (p. 87). Each pastor's transformation involved confronting what they considered to be a chronic social problem in the Black community. Yet church (or community) members were asked to shift their existing frames about how to think about and respond to disenfranchised groups (i.e., women, sexual minorities, the poor, substance users, and the sick) and controversial, divisive issues. Confusion ensued when, "a person operating within one set of assumptions comes to a problem he cannot handle within his dominant scheme" (p. 31). The church cultural tools studied here – prophetic biblical ideology, social activism, self-help, and prayer manifest throughout each conflict. Black clergy who espouse self-help and social action appear to have both created conflict for their megachurches and relied on similar tools to negotiate it. The scenarios illustrate how even large, well - resourced churches can be rattled and irrevocably affected when they face oppositional forces such long-time community norms and values and counter-resistance groups.

6. Conclusions

The goal of this study was to examine Black megachurch experiences and responses to major conflict. The topic is important because many large churches seem to be considered immune. Findings here for the three case studies showed that, although each church weathered a considerable cultural "storm," each also felt the repercussions of conflict. Mt. Canaan experienced stigma from the local community, but has gone on to establish a reputation for social services for the disenfranchised. Although the pastor considers the church stronger now, Valiant's move toward inclusivity resulted in the loss of half its' membership. And New Beginnings experienced community backlash and subsequent membership decline in the wake of a march for family values. I posit that cultural tools emerged from this contested space akin to historic Black Church tools that were mediated by charismatic clergy ([29], [41]). As illustrated by Cultural Theory, these tools helped create strategies of action to withstand persecution and/or challenge long-standing cultural norms in the Black community ([13], [20], [46], [47], [48]). Despite their size and resources, Black megachurches are not impervious to economic strain, sexual innuendos, and vacillating memberships ([13], [24], [25], [53]) or the types of conflict described here. These findings will hopefully inform future work on the impact of cultural lag, competing cultural traditions, the implications of ideological change, and overcoming conflict for community building. These conflicts appear to have similar origins, steeped in ideological differences, denominational distinctions, concerns about weakening the Black family, and pastoral profiles.

Based on Cultural theory, it can be argued that the Black megachurch is operating during an *unsettled period* when

prevailing ideologies, values, beliefs, traditions, and habits are under contestation and people are attempting to buttress their beliefs to fortify their everyday lives, reduce ambiguities and anxieties, and question unfamiliar contemporary perspectives. Conflict is compounded when church ideologies do not mesh with existing Christian dictates or pre-existing beliefs from the broader Black community about family values, morality, gender roles, and what constitutes social action. Despite ties to the historic Black Church, these findings also illustrate the emergence of specific Black megachurch cultural tools that synergize spiritual and secular dynamics in unexpected ways and thus require us to reconsider how Cultural theory can be applied. In addition to reminding readers of the cultural heterogeneity evident in Black religious spaces, the current study illustrates the need for additional studies on Black megachurch culture. On a more sobering, yet practical note, these results point to the importance of clergy accountability for the cultural tools they introduce as well as the reality and potentially long-term implications of cultural lag and church conflict for potential adherents, Black Christians, the broader Christian community, and skeptical on-lookers in secular society.

Unlike during settled periods when cultural tools are deeply ensconced in strategies of action, an argument can be made that the Black Church (and its megachurch counterparts by extension) is now in an unsettled period relative to how to respond to historically disenfranchised segments of the Black community and challenges such as HIV/AIDS ([13], [20], [46], [47], [48]). The examples of conflict studied here illustrate attempts to create new strategies of action based on unconventional usage of prophetic biblical ideology and different ways of thinking about what it means to be a Christian. And because emergent cultural tools and new ways of using existing ones become more evident during unsettled periods, they become more accessible to academic inquiry. These findings warrant other important queries. What will be the influence of emergent cultural tools specifically endemic to Black megachurches such as belief in extreme *favor*? What else can large Black churches learn from their Black predecessors in response to adversity? Can Black megachurches cultivate the critical mass of socially aware Blacks needed for activism akin to the CRM? What can Black megachurch charismatic leaders learn from the lives and legacies of Fannie Lou Hamer and Bayard Rustin? A more detailed discussion of intra-group diversity is warranted (for example, based on denominational distinctions as well as rural and urban differences). The current study does not adequately illumine the complicated dynamics that enable Black megachurches to create a unique niche in a seemingly crowded U.S. religious market. Nor does it do justice to the complexities of the Black community and how Black Church culture manifests given heterogeneity based on space, gender, and class. Yet if experiences from the historic Black Church are any indication of the future, they predict continued Black megachurch involvement despite their detractors; they also foreshadow continued trials and triumphs based on the solidarity and strength that can emerge in contested spaces.

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[1] "Black megachurches" only refer to those in the U.S. Acknowledging its diversity, "the Black Church" is used here to represent the collective and the recognized broad commonalities across such churches.

[2] Ideology is broadly defined here as the body of biblically-based beliefs espoused by a church. Some scholars equate ideology with theology and link it to doctrines, norms, and values. That debate is outside the focus on this study.

[3] I used the standard megachurch definition provided earlier during sample selection. Survey data and church written histories were used to determine size for sample selection. I used the current range (120-150 U.S. Black megachurches) as a guide to select at least a 10% sample ([27]).

[4] I interview Black pastors because they have been shown to wield more influence than their White peers ([34], [39]). Initial contact included mailing project information, e-mails, and telephone calls over a 3-6 month process. Logistics prohibited four pastor interviews, but they selected clergy representatives to be interviewed. Contact the author for more sample details.

[5] Some Black megachurch pastors declined to participate based on scheduling problems; several are completing their own memoires. Several refused and no reason was provided. It is possible that those pastors who believed that their churches would be seen in the best light would also be more apt to participate. Their counterparts would be expected to decline. Yet programs and profiles differ substantially across the 16 churches and do not suggest concerns about self-selection. Black megachurch interviewees were offered a $50 gift. Pseudonyms are used for all church names and persons.

[6] Several churches here have slightly smaller weekly attendances, but their pastorate and programs, warrant inclusion as *large* churches based on megachurch definitions based on size *and* programs ([45]).

[7] A distinction is made between Valiant Church and other congregations that were intentionally organized for the gay and lesbian population and predominately serve this group. Valiant was not organized for this purpose and, according to the pastor, now includes heterosexual and homosexual members.