

DAVID A. ROOZEN & JAMES R. NIEMAN, EDITORS

CHURCH, IDENTITY, AND CHANGE

THEOLOGY AND DENOMINATIONAL
STRUCTURES IN UNSETTLED TIMES

The National Baptist Convention: Traditions and Contemporary Challenges

Aldon D. Morris and Shayne Lee

Pp 336 – 379 in Roozen and Nieman (eds), *Church, Identity and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times* (Eerdmans, 2005). Also in *Church, Identity and Change: "How Firm a Foundation? The Institutional Origins of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc."* by Quinton Hosford Dixie and "Becoming a People of God: Theological Reflections on the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc." by David Emmanuel Goatley.

Resources from the *Organizing Religious Work Project* of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research
hirr.hartsem.edu

CHURCH, IDENTITY, and CHANGE

*Theology and Denominational Structures
in Unsettled Times*

Edited by

David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman

Hartford Institute for Religion Research
Hartford Seminary
hrr@hartsem.edu

© 2005 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
All rights reserved

Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
255 Jefferson Ave. S.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503 /
P.O. Box 163, Cambridge CB3 9PU U.K.

Printed in the United States of America

10 09 08 07 06 05 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Church, identity, and change: theology and denominational structures in unsettled times /
edited by David A. Roozen & James Nieman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8028-2819-1 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Protestant churches — United States — History. 2. Protestant churches —
Doctrines — History. 3. United States — Church history.
I. Roozen, David A. II. Nieman, James R., 1956-

BR515.C526 2005

280'.4'0973 — dc22

2004060785

Contents

Introduction	1
<i>David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman</i>	
“More Than Evangelical”: The Challenge of the Evolving Identity of the Assemblies of God	35
<i>Gary B. McGee</i>	
Charisma and Structure in the Assemblies of God: Revisiting O’Dea’s Five Dilemmas	45
<i>Margaret M. Poloma</i>	
The Challenges of Organization and Spirit in the Implementation of Theology in the Assemblies of God	97
<i>William W. Menzies</i>	
A Short History of the Association of Vineyard Churches	132
<i>Bill Jackson</i>	
Routinizing Charisma: The Vineyard Christian Fellowship in the Post-Wimber Era	141
<i>Donald E. Miller</i>	
Theological Perspective and Reflection on the Vineyard Christian Fellowship	163
<i>Don Williams</i>	
Anglican Mission in Changing Times: A Brief Institutional History of the Episcopal Church, USA	188
<i>Ian T. Douglas</i>	
A Primacy of Systems: Confederation, Corporation, and Communion	198-
<i>William H. Swatos, Jr.</i>	
Crisis as Opportunity: Scandal, Structure, and Change in the Episcopal Church on the Cusp of the Millennium	227
<i>Jennifer M. Phillips</i>	
Structuring a Confessional Church for the Global Age: Admission to Communion by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod	253
<i>Paul Marschke</i>	
Fellowship and Communion in the Postmodern Era: The Case of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod	263
<i>David L. Carlson</i>	
The Theological Meaning and Use of Communion: The Case of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod	294
<i>Eugene W. Bunkowske</i>	

Contents

How Firm a Foundation? The Institutional Origins of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.	327
<i>Quinton Hosford Dixie</i>	
The National Baptist Convention: Traditions and Contemporary Challenges	336
<i>Aldon D. Morris and Shayne Lee</i>	
Becoming a People of God: Theological Reflections on the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.	380
<i>David Emmanuel Goatley</i>	
The Reformed Church in America as a National Church	400
<i>John Coakley</i>	
National Engagement with Localism: The Last Gasp of the Corporate Denomination?	410
<i>Donald A. Luidens</i>	
No Longer Business as Usual: The Reformed Church in America Seen through Its Mission Statement	436
<i>Steve Mathonnet-VanderWell</i>	
The United Church of Christ: Redefining Unity in Christ as Unity in Diversity	458
<i>Barbara Brown Zikmund</i>	
Strategy and Restructure in the United Church of Christ	466
<i>Emily Barman and Mark Chaves</i>	
Faith and Organization in the United Church of Christ	493
<i>Roger L. Shinn</i>	
Methodism as Machine	523
<i>Russell E. Richey</i>	
Leadership, Identity, and Mission in a Changing United Methodist Church	534
<i>James Rutland Wood</i>	
Practical Theology at Work in the United Methodist Church: Restructuring, Reshaping, Reclaiming	565
<i>Pamela D. Couture</i>	
National Denominational Structures' Engagement with Postmodernity: An Integrative Summary from an Organizational Perspective	588
<i>David A. Roozen</i>	
The Theological Work of Denominations	625
<i>James R. Nieman</i>	
Contributors	654

The National Baptist Convention: Traditions and Contemporary Challenges

Aldon D. Morris and Shayne Lee

The National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. (NBC), is over a hundred years old. It is the largest black religious organization in the world with over five million members and thousands of affiliated churches. The NBC reflects the aspirations, contradictions, struggles, and culture of the entire African American community. It is a unique denomination because its constituency is composed of a historically oppressed population that has endured two and a half centuries of slavery and three-quarters of a century of Jim Crow oppression. The legacy of this oppression as well as contemporary racial inequality continue to influence all aspects of the NBC. As a denomination, the NBC cannot be understood outside this social context.

Because of its long history and enormous resources, the NBC is a central institution within the black community. It has the capacity to generate vast economic resources, influence the outcome of political elections, launch and sustain social change movements, and produce cultural innovations. It administers to the inner lives of millions of people troubled by racism and spiritual challenges. Thus, the NBC is an important national force affecting the black community and the nation. Because the NBC has seldom realized its potential, some astute observers have often viewed it as a sleeping giant. In this essay we address the NBC's traditions and contemporary challenges and seek to shed light on whether it is likely to remain relatively dormant or awaken fully and realize its potential.

This study of the NBC is rooted in an organizational, cultural, and gender analytic framework. First, we seek to understand the NBC as a formal organization embedded in complex macro- and microsocial relations. In this connection, attention will be paid to the NBC's internal, structural, and political dynamics and to its organizational environment. Second, the NBC is a profoundly

cultural institution concerned with belief systems, moral matters, and interpretive dilemmas. Thus, it has to be confronted as a cultural enterprise. Finally, the NBC is a deeply gendered institution and its gender relations are central to its functioning and will be important in shaping its future. Thus, our efforts to understand the NBC are guided by an analysis of its organizational dynamics, its cultural dimensions, and its gender relations.¹

Before proceeding, we situate the NBC within the context of the seven major, historically black religious denominations and briefly describe our methodology. The NBC is by far the largest black religious denomination, three times the size of any other. It is a part of the larger black Baptist community that also encompasses the National Baptist Convention of America and the Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc. The black Methodist denominations include the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. The final black denomination is the Church of God in Christ. The Black Muslim community is also important in this context given its growing significance in the black community. Black Baptist churches are unique in that they function according to the local autonomy principle that grants independence and sovereignty to local congregations. The black Baptist denominations, along with the Church of God in Christ, are the most conservative with respect to gender inequality, especially as it relates to the ordination of women. With the exception of the Black Muslim faith, these denominations differ little in theology, but they do differ in polity, history, and traditions. They all compete for the hearts and souls of black America.

The Autonomy Principle

The power of the NBC rests not at the top of the organization, but comes from below.² The NBC's power is anchored in its local congregations, local associa-

1. The data for this study consist of open-ended interviews with NBC leaders and scholars of religion knowledgeable of the NBC, as well as organizational documents, participant observations, and numerous secondary sources. While the data do not constitute a representative sample, we believe the diverse data sources enable us to present a balanced view of the NBC. Unreferenced quotes are from the above-noted interviews.

2. See James Melvin Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship: The Black Baptist Quest for Social Power* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1986); C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in African American Experience* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990). This was also emphasized in our interview with a president of a black seminary and black church scholar.

tions, and state conventions. The NBC has no power to force individuals, churches, associations, or state conventions to join the national denomination. It cannot appoint or ordain local pastors, or determine which churches should form associations, nor can it appoint state presidents. The NBC cannot demand that any of these entities fund the national headquarters. In short, there exist no presiding bishops, elders, or national authorities that can issue authoritative orders to any level outside the national convention. In the black Baptist world, local congregations are autonomous and reserve supreme power to run their own affairs. This is the principle of local autonomy, and each church, local association, and state convention jealously guard it.

The autonomy principle is the regulating guide of the black Baptist church community. A former general secretary of the NBC explained that "Baptist churches are independent . . . we are not connected in the sense that you could talk about the Presbyterian Church, talk about the United Methodist Church. Those are connectional churches. But you have to talk about Baptist churches. . . . So it [power] comes up from the bottom rather than down from the top." Similarly, another NBC pastor explained that the local church is "totally self-sovereign in its own right; we don't have to answer to any bishop. Nobody can come here and tell me what to do. We can change something in the middle of the stream and can't nobody say nothing to us about it." According to church scholar Robert Franklin, the NBC is unique precisely because it "represents something quite extraordinary in the history of the evolution of the Black church in America in so far as it represents the coming together of a vast number of independent institutions and local congregations that willingly and voluntarily decided to convene and cooperate together as a national denomination." Similarly, Lincoln and Mamiya wrote that "the church itself, that is, the congregation, is the supreme governing body."³

The autonomy principle enables pastors to function as the main instruments of power. The local pastor is the head of his church family. In most instances he is given the latitude to make major decisions and to set the tone theologically and programmatically. While he may share power with a board of trustees or the deacon board, it is the pastor who usually functions as the dominant actor of the local congregation. Although important checks and balances exist, they usually do not prevent the pastor from determining the outcomes of most financial decisions and delegating authority. The pastor is the head of his religious household and retains power much like the classic charismatic leader. Thus, the office of pastor is paramount in the black Baptist polity and within the Baptist community.

3. Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, p. 43.

Rise of Local Associations and Conventions

Local associations and state conventions predated the NBC. The slave pastor realized that he and his church exercised limited power as isolated actors. During slavery and the Jim Crow era, the black church faced enormous challenges. The oppressive institution of slavery needed to be overthrown, and self-help programs were needed for the downtrodden and largely illiterate black masses. Additionally, at the heart of the mission of the black church was the challenge of saving souls for Christ and preparing black people to live Christian lives so that upon death they would pass into the kingdom of God. Black church leaders also concerned themselves with the souls and well-being of blacks in the Black Diaspora, especially in Africa and the Caribbean. They concluded that black churches should establish foreign mission boards through which blacks in foreign lands could be lifted out of barbarianism and elevated into modern civilization while simultaneously embracing Christ.

These were daunting tasks that faced the slave church. Nor did they change substantially with the overthrow of slavery. Following slavery the Jim Crow order was established, ushering in a new system of black subordination. Lynchings, Jim Crowed—public accommodations, excruciating poverty, illiteracy, and a host of other challenges confronted the black church in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such problems were too intractable to be solved by individual pastors and churches. A collective response was the only viable option.

During slavery and the early Jim Crow period, local black Baptist churches began forming local associations to address their common problems.⁴ They reasoned that they could become more effective by pooling their resources and increasing their numerical strength by creating local associations that united like-minded churches. During slavery these associated churches addressed issues of education, mutual aid, and domestic missions. However, as Washington pointed out, these early associations also functioned as antislavery societies.⁵ Black Baptist associations proliferated during the early years of the Jim Crow regime. Thus, early in their history black Baptist churches began evolving local associations to pursue the collective goals of an oppressed people. Because these associations were voluntary alliances, they did not violate the principle of congregational autonomy, for local churches were free to associate and disassociate. Having arisen in the slave period and proliferated throughout the Jim Crow period, local associations became a major structural component of the black Baptist community.

4. Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship*.

5. Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship*, pp. 27-38.

Black ministers are a mobile group, relative to the black population, because of their economic independence and the nature of their profession. During slavery and the Jim Crow period, black ministers traveled across state and regional lines to share pulpits and attend conferences and other religious and social gatherings. The associations facilitated these interactions because they encompassed wide geographical areas that often stretched across state lines. As black ministries solidified these contacts, they began to sense the need to build statewide and even quasi-national organizations. Such organizations provided additional leverage to attack social inequality, to pool resources, to build strong domestic and foreign missions, and to address the needs of the community. During the mid-1800s statewide and regional conventions were organized. These organizations operated according to the autonomy principle at the state and regional levels. Their success revealed that it was possible to build large unifying structures. As a result, state conventions emerged as a major structural unit of the black Baptist community while the regional conventions sparked the interest to organize a national convention.

Between 1880 and 1893 the Baptist Foreign Mission Convention, the American National Convention, and the National Baptist Educational Convention were organized. While each of these aspired to be the national convention, regional and political differences prevented them from attaining this goal. Nevertheless, their presence created the foundation on which a national denomination of black Baptist churches could be built.

Rise and Development of the National Baptist Convention

During the late 1880s discussions pertaining to unification occurred among the leaders of the three conventions.⁶ They held a meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, at the Friendship Baptist Church in 1895 to determine whether a merger was possible. These contentious discussions led to a historic merger. Lincoln and Mamiya captured the historic moment: "The merger was accomplished at a meeting convened in Atlanta on September 28, 1895, and attended by over 500 delegates and observers. The resulting organization was the National Baptist Convention USA, with subsidiary Foreign Mission, Home Mission, and Education Boards, to which a publishing concern was added in 1897. Rev. E. C. Morris was elected the first president of the New Convention."⁷ The birth of

6. See Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship*, pp. 184-85, and Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, pp. 28-29.

7. Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, p. 28.

the NBC was a culmination of the collective aspirations of black Baptist clergy. With this new organization, they were finally in a position to operate from a national base.

The basic structure of the NBC has not changed in over a century. The NBC encompasses four interconnected structural levels. First is the local church, or congregation, which is its most basic unit. Second are the associations, which are collections of local churches. Third is the state convention, which is comprised of statewide affiliated churches and local associations. The fourth level is the national convention, which encompasses affiliated churches, local associations, and state conventions. The autonomy principle is institutionalized at each level. A former general secretary of the NBC put it this way:

Baptist Churches are independent but we agree to associate. We associate in local associations, state conventions in terms of our state, and the national. . . . The reason that we associate is that we might be able to share together or benefit from each other's counsel in matters of doctrine and in matters of polity that affect us at our local churches, that affect us at our association or state or national. . . . We associate that we might be able to do together things that would be difficult for us to do individually.

The NBC is often referred to as a "fellowship" among its members to convey the voluntary nature of the national convention.

Thus, the survival and vitality of the NBC depend on the support of its affiliated bodies. Without that support it could not accomplish its major goals of evangelism, home mission, foreign mission, and the production of church literature through its Sunday School Publishing Board. The affiliated organizations provide the NBC with the majority of its finances through membership dues, fund-raising campaigns, and registrations at the annual meeting. The elected and appointed leadership of the NBC is drawn from its affiliated organizations. The state conventions have evolved into major centers of power and resources. In 1998 there existed sixty-one of them, all affiliates of the NBC. No candidate for NBC's presidency can win without the backing of a majority of state conventions. Most NBC presidents have been state presidents because that position provides them with visibility, access to valuable networks, and legitimacy. Moreover, state presidents constitute the majority of NBC's national board, upon which they sit because of their state office. A great part of the funds used to support the national office is raised by state conventions. The state conventions are pivotal sources of power and resources on which the NBC rests.

NBC's Office of President

The presidency of the NBC is the most powerful office within the black Baptist community. As the chairman of the NBC's Foreign Mission Board stated, the president has this power because "He can appoint a certain number of members at large on the board of directors. In most cases he can influence the elections of state presidents, who become members of the board of directors. He has almost complete control over the finances through the treasurer. He can determine the various programs, many by bringing them before the board, and unless it's terribly objectionable we're gonna give it to him."

A former general secretary of the NBC agreed that the "President is able to nominate all of the other auxiliaries and many of the other leaders of the convention so that's a great deal of power in terms of patronage because the convention usually accepts the nomination." Another NBC pastor argued that "the President of the NBC is the leader of the leaders in the African-American Baptist Church. . . . There is no way that we can have this discussion without talking about the absolute authority of the position of president." And another NBC pastor remarked that the presidency "means that you've got one hell of a powerful man. You can get things done. Most of the time the president gets things done his way. He's got power to get money, and he has the power to do what he wants with it."

The NBC presidency allows its occupant to achieve a measure of power in the larger society. A scholar of the black church identified the source of this external power: "For one thing it has symbolic power. To be leader of the largest convention then you serve a representative role. So therefore, just the symbol of that can be translated into cultural capital, political capital, because you can go to the U.S. President and let them know that I represent eight million people, or you can go to a state governor and let them know that I represent eight million people."

The president of the NBC is automatically included in the elite leadership of black America by virtue of the position. Thus, the presidency of the NBC houses internal and external power. As one leader of the convention concluded: "If you're the leader of 8½ million people, everybody will recognize you automatically. Domestically, and afar, you are somebody."

The historical absence of a tenure policy has also contributed to the power that individual presidents have amassed. Indeed, historically NBC presidents have served for extraordinarily long periods of time. This practice was evident from the start when the first NBC president, E. C. Morris, served for twenty-eight consecutive years. Its third president, L. K. Williams, served for seventeen consecutive years. During the modern era, this practice continued

when J. H. Jackson was elected in 1953 and served until 1982. T. J. Jemison, who served twelve years before stepping down only when a tenure rule was established, followed Jackson. Such long tenure enhanced the capacity of NBC presidents to become less accountable and to act in a relatively unilateral fashion. A seminary president spoke directly to this situation:

I think that in the past there has been a kind of laissez-faire attitude in respect to the power of the president. . . . There's a long history from Lacey Kirk Williams to J. H. Jackson, and through Jemison and so leaders who served long tenures who amassed favors, who are able to reward loyalty, who as ambassadors negotiate with other public and secular powers, especially corporations and the government and received certain benefits through those negotiations and are able to again reward their loyal followers. So there's the president with a very strong portfolio that has operated. And that's been the norm in the National Baptist Convention with relatively little checks and balances despite those loose structures that exist that are supposed to exercise some accountability.

The lack of a tenure rule coupled with minimal accountability created what some refer to as the *imperial presidency*. These practices tended to stifle democratic procedures at the highest level of the NBC. They also created room for presidents to become corrupt and to endanger the convention.

Earlier we argued that the pastor is the main source of power in the black Baptist church. The typical pastor operates as the patriarch of his church family. He is often able to maneuver around checks and balances to realize his will. All presidents of the NBC have been pastors, and they maintain their local pastorates during their presidency. As NBC presidents they function as the pastors of the largest church of them all — the convention. They run the convention largely in the same manner as their local church. The members of the convention perceive the president as the pastor of the convention who deserves the latitude and power to administer this large religious family. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of those to whom the president is accountable are also pastors. Thus, they understand the role of a Baptist pastor and are hesitant to subject the president to strict rules and regulations. Thus, the NBC president generally “gets his way” because of the autonomy granted to the pastor.

There are structural limitations and opportunities built into the NBC's presidency that can increase the likelihood that a president will exploit the office. The NBC does not have a pension plan. This can create anxiety about one's financial future and may press the NBC president to use the office to acquire funds for personal security. Additionally, NBC presidents continue to pastor

their local church while serving as president, thus holding two full-time jobs simultaneously and receiving the salary from their local church. The presidency itself is also a lucrative position because the incumbent is in high demand for speaking engagements that pay considerable honorariums. Thus, one can leave the office in much better financial condition than when he arrived.

In summary, the office of president is central to the functioning of the NBC. In it resides a great deal of power. Candidates campaign extensively to be elected, because they realize that the office will provide them with considerable institutional influence and personal power. Because of the enormous discretion given to the office, the president plays a central role in shaping the direction, as well as the health, of the convention.

The NBC and the Baptist Vision

The NBC and its affiliated congregations, associations, and state conventions are not held together by structure alone. These enterprises have been developed to produce and disseminate particular religious views. Black Baptist organizational structures, therefore, are energized and given meaning through intense cultural work. They also constitute the main sites where black Baptists engage in continuous and intense activities to realize the goals of their community. Moreover, these sites are also the major historic reservoirs of African American culture. There is a common system of beliefs that drives the NBC and unifies the members of the larger community. In general terms, black Baptists share the basic religious beliefs of the larger Baptist community. Nevertheless, they have appropriated them and fashioned them into a unique faith to deal with the distinctive social conditions of African Americans.

A doctrinal consensus exists within the NBC and the black Baptist community. That consensus is rooted in the articles of faith embraced by the larger Baptist community and adopted by the NBC. Consistent with these articles, black Baptists believe that the Holy Bible is the Word of God and the supreme standard by which human beings are to be judged; that there is but one living God who encompasses the Trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; that Christ is the Son of God who died on the cross but was raised from the grave and ascended into heaven to reign with his Father; that Christ died for the sins of all human beings, and in so doing, made it possible for all to be saved from sin through the grace of God; that in order to be saved, one must be baptized; that the duty of a Christian is to live according to God's Word and to spread that Word to all corners of the globe; that the pastor has been appointed by God to bring the true Word to the people; that God is just, fair, and forgiv-

ing; that Christ will return to earth and gather all Christians, both living and dead, unto him and take them to heaven where they will joyfully dwell in paradise, with God, throughout eternity; and that those, both living and dead, who chose a sinful life will be punished in hell throughout eternity. These are powerful beliefs that unite and inspire black Baptists. They existed long before the articles of faith were enunciated in 1833, but NBC's formal adoption of the articles provides followers with clear-cut guidelines.

Nevertheless, black Baptists were destined not to follow the vision in a rote manner. For one thing, these tenets are continuously debated both theologically and practically. Moreover, the Baptist vision had to be refashioned to address the predicament of a subjugated people. The institutions of slavery and Jim Crow created unique conditions for the black population. They caused blacks to be viewed and treated as an inferior species of humanity. This oppression prevented blacks from building viable institutions through which their interests could be pursued. It also caused high black illiteracy and the lack of opportunities and educational vehicles to reverse these conditions. Thus, slavery and Jim Crow generated the need for blacks to develop the intellectual and material resources required to dismantle these houses of bondage, so that freedom could be achieved.

This quest for freedom shaped black Baptist churches and the NBC. It caused the black Baptist community to weave a creative vision that guided their theology and religious institutions. To be sure, blacks emphasized certain aspects of the Holy Scriptures not central to the vision of white Baptists. Black congregants were drawn to the view that God was a God of justice and fairness. They gravitated to the narratives in the Bible that spoke to the biblical struggles between oppressors and the oppressed. A seminary president highlighted this emphasis: "We as African Americans have tended to think of ourselves as a biblical people, as a people of the Book. In reading the Old Testament we are really reading our story — the pilgrimage from Exodus, from slavery to freedom." Thus, black Baptists have tended to develop an activist theology that put forth the view that God is concerned with earthly justice. Martin Luther King, Jr., emphasized this thrust: "But a religion true to its nature must also be concerned about man's social condition. . . . Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion."⁸ In this view God requires an activism geared toward social change in which he is placed on the side of those fighting for justice.

This activist interpretation of Scriptures has played a key role in the de-

8. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride toward Freedom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 36.

velopment of the NBC. A central thrust of the convention is its work to uplift the black community. Immediately following slavery the NBC began founding and supporting black schools and colleges.⁹ Its churches constituted stations along the Underground Railroad. They have also been key sites of mobilization for resistance movements during slavery and the Jim Crow periods.¹⁰ From the very beginning, the convention has promoted black literacy by establishing a publishing board that supplied churches with religious literature. One of the convention's earliest documents declared that a goal of the denomination was "to encourage our literary men and women, and promote the interest of Baptist literature."¹¹ Similarly, from the beginning the convention positioned itself as the forum through which the overall interests of the black community could be pursued. Thus, the same document argued that the role of the national convention would be "to discuss questions pertaining especially to the religious, educational, industrial and social interest of our people. . . . To give an opportunity for the best thinkers and writers to be heard . . . [and] that, united, we may be more powerful for good and strengthen our pride in the denomination."¹²

Thus, the NBC developed as an institution that encompassed the political, economic, and social aspirations of an oppressed people. Out of necessity, the NBC fashioned a theology and a belief system that promoted an activist church concerned with the oppression of African Americans.¹³

The NBC has also played an important role in convincing black people that they were "somebody" despite contrary messages espoused by white supremacy. During slavery black churches promoted the idea that blacks were important because they were God's children. This race consciousness was crystallized in the NBC. Prior to its birth and during its early years, members of the black Baptist clergy differed over whether a national convention should exist independent of white Baptists and whether it should conduct business separate from white denominations.¹⁴ The "separatists" won out over the "integration-

9. See Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, pp. 29-30, and E. L. Thomas, *A History of the National Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Townsend Press, 1999), p. xiv.

10. See Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Vantage Books, 1983), and Aldon Morris, "Centuries of Black Protest: Its Significance for America and the World," in *Race in America*, ed. H. Hill and J. Jones, Jr. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).

11. *The 1998 Annual Report, the Record of the 118th Annual Session and Minutes of the 1998-1999 Board of Director's Meeting* (National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., 1999), p. 19.

12. *1998 Annual Report*, p. 19.

13. See Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

14. See Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship*, and Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in African American Experience*.

ists” by arguing that they owed a debt to future generations. E. C. Morris, the first president of the NBC, argued that a Baptist publishing house was necessary because it would provide more “race employment, race development,” and business experience.¹⁵ The debt, therefore, consisted of building a legacy of work and independent institutions valuable to future generations.

Thus, the NBC developed as an institution imbued with black consciousness and race pride. It sought to be a shining beacon, championing the message that black people could build their own institutions, produce literary works, erect forums from which the contentious issues of the day could be addressed, advance the freedom agenda, and build God’s kingdom. This sense of black pride and consciousness is alive in the contemporary NBC. One of the recent presidents of the Illinois State Convention put it this way: “It [NBC] means a heritage of our race, our denomination. . . . I think the most powerful thing is that out of a hundred years existing, we are still in charge of this one thing that Black people have that we can call ours. . . . Well it’s the only thing that white folks can’t tell us what to do. It’s National Baptists, Black owned, Black run. We operate it. It’s ours from start to finish.”

The NBC’s Foreign Mission Board chairman registered a similar sentiment, declaring that “it is a great source of our history as well as our salvation history of Black people in the United States.” The renowned black Baptist pastor Gardner Taylor simply refers to the NBC as the “House of our Fathers.”¹⁶

Given the historic conditions of black people, the NBC was left with little choice but to embrace the political striving and ideological tendencies of the African American community. As a result, the NBC is political by nature and is bathed in black religious nationalism developed by a people seeking a positive sense of self so long denied by the white majority. For believers in the faith and the NBC, a religiously based political view of the world and race consciousness are constitutive parts of what it means to be a member of the black Baptist family.

The Family Metaphor

The idea of family is a cornerstone metaphor of the black Baptist community and the NBC. Members of a black Baptist church view themselves as a church

15. Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship*, p. 181.

16. Gardner Taylor, “The President’s Message to the Progressive National Baptist Convention, INC., September 1968,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979), p. 263.

family. Likewise, NBC members view themselves as the family of the National Baptist Convention. This family metaphor has power because it provides the boundary markers of the community and suggests the types of social relationships members should establish internally and externally. It is not surprising that the church family metaphor has developed given the hostile treatment blacks have received from a white racist society. In many ways the black church has functioned as a warm nurturing sanctuary where people feel safe and are encouraged to develop their gifts and talents. It is a place where dignity is conferred and where each individual matters. Like a family, the black church has sought to be the "balm in Gilead" for black people.

The concept of family conjures up images of deep personal relationships, loyalty among kinship members, obedience to parental authority, trust and nurturance. In America the family concept also generates images of patriarchal authority where the father is the legitimate head of the household. Finally, the family image connotes strict boundaries separating members from outsiders. In fact, "family business" refers to private activities of family members and to the expectation that outsiders are not to interfere in family matters. The family, therefore, is a tightly knit unit where intense personal relationships are privileged.

African American churches usually perceive themselves as church families. The use of the family metaphor is especially prevalent in the black Baptist church. A black church historian spoke to the centrality of the family metaphor: "The sort of ecclesiological image that is used often for a Black congregation is that it's the family of God and we are a church family. The second thing is that with this family metaphor then you [church members] have to try and figure out how do you relate to the power structure. Language of rebellion is used, as rebellion with rebellious teenagers. Languages of the need to follow leadership, sometimes language of obedience is evoked, you need to obey. This family metaphor sets the norm for behavior, cooperating, following leadership, etc." In this imagery the head of the family is the pastor who is almost always a male figure. Sociologist Cheryl Gilkes refers to this imagery as an "ethic of family-hood" that usually relegates the activity of women to a feminine space where influential women are referred to as "mothers."¹⁷

The family metaphor plays an important role in the life of the NBC. It encourages its polity to operate more like a familial form of social organization than an impersonal bureaucracy. Power struggles within the NBC are re-

17. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "The Roles of Church and Community Mothers: Ambivalent American Sexism or Fragmented African Familyhood?" in *African-American Religion*, ed. Timothy E. Furlong and Albert J. Raboteau (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 367-88.

sponded to as “family fights” rather than as organizational phenomena. It is difficult to hold those in power accountable according to routine business practices, because family logic dictates that they are treated as parental authorities. Our black church historian argued: “People feel, sometimes, that as the pastor rules or runs the congregation, the president should rule or run the Convention, and that you need to give the president the freedom, the space, to see what he can do, and not try to fight him all the way. Because it is not perceived that the president is a representative image, it is not the image that we have this sharing of power, sort of this democratic model.”

The family image mitigates against the establishment of a set of formal procedures to remove an officer — especially the president of the NBC — who fails to execute his duties effectively. One does not remove a father from his family. Moreover, when outsiders attempt to interfere with NBC’s leadership, the family metaphor enables insiders to label them as enemies who must be resisted and not allowed to infiltrate the sacred family. That is, the family model instructs insiders that, again quoting the above-noted black church historian: “You don’t leave your family, you don’t desert your family especially during times of crisis. So when a crisis comes up, that is when you need to be there, and then when people call for change . . . they are seen as being disloyal, they are seen as not following leadership.”

The black Baptist belief in the power of grace also supports the family model of social organization in the NBC, because in this view, human beings are inherently sinful and frail. This belief in grace requires that forgiveness be given to a transgressor who repents and pledges to seek the path of righteousness. It enables the members of the church family to remain in the fold and to be given another chance to regain trust despite past wrongdoings.

Finally, the family metaphor makes it easier for black male clergy to transplant patriarchal relations into the churches and the NBC. They argue that the Holy Scriptures demand that the male head of the church should run God’s church as he runs his family. Thus, they adopt the instructions to Timothy that the head of the church “must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way; for if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God’s church?” (1 Tim. 3:4-5). The family model allows the convention to have, and project, a patriarchal face of power. In short, one has to be attuned to the power of the family metaphor, for it helps to order the structural and cultural realities of the NBC. As our black church historian put it: “There’s a host of other images that could be used but the one that dominates the Black Church is that we are a church family. . . . Once that metaphor is used it begins to take over in certain ways.”

Preaching and the NBC

Preaching is the privileged form of communication in black Baptist churches, and in the NBC. Within these communities preaching is the fine art through which the clergy attempt to connect with the church community. Preaching plays a fundamental role in all aspects of the NBC, including its power dynamics, its opportunity structures, and its overall culture. As we argued earlier, the Baptist church emerged to attend to the material and spiritual needs of a collectivity that was largely illiterate and severely oppressed. The denial of educational opportunities during slavery prompted African Americans to develop a rich oral culture. In this context preaching developed as a major black art form that has been refined down through generations.

Moreover, there are theological and religious reasons why preaching has become so central in the black Baptist church. Black Baptists believe that the Bible contains the holy words of God. The Bible is referred to as the Word, and it is believed that ultimately these Scriptures are the pure truths of God. The preacher is viewed as the instrument appointed by God through which his Word is communicated to believers and sinners alike. The preacher is to study and prepare himself to receive the Word from God. However, once he has done this, the act of preaching is thought to be that moment when God uses his lips, gestures, and style to connect people to his divine Word.

Black Baptist preachers are aware of the crucial role that preaching plays in the church and the NBC. One convention pastor captured the power of black Baptist preaching when he stated that "Preaching is at the very heart of what it means to be a Baptist. In addition, of course that is both our commendation as well as our condemnation, because we should not just be about preaching. But that would be very difficult and, matter of fact, almost impossible. . . . You have to be able to lay down the word." Another Baptist minister concluded that "you cannot deny that one of the strongest foundations in the Black church across the board is preaching. I don't care what you preach, if you preach it well enough you'll have a following." The seminary president we interviewed stated that in the black Baptist tradition, "What's going on there is that God seems to select spokespersons, not all of them exceedingly eloquent, some of them with stammering tongues, but clearly those who stand before the people and offer as God's representative a vision of a better life. So that office of the preacher, the eloquent speaker, has been quite exalted and reified in Black church culture. So folks who have some gifts and some abilities can really exploit that tradition. We privilege the pulpit in the Black Church culture over the priest." Preaching is the focal point of worship and politics in the black Baptist church, and that fact greatly affects the NBC.

The way to attain power in the black Baptist church is to become a pastor. The way to gain even more power is by becoming an important pastor in the convention. The ultimate power is gained when one becomes the president of the NBC. That position means that one has become the leader of the largest black Baptist community in the world — the National Baptist Convention. Becoming a pastor at any of these levels requires the ability to preach.

The first leg to a pastorship is receiving a “call” from God to preach. The “calling” occurs when one has a personal experience with God in which God speaks directly to the individual, making him aware that it is God’s wish for him to preach the gospel. When an individual is considered for a vacant pastor position, he delivers a trial sermon to the congregation. If the candidate fails to preach well, he is unlikely to be successful. Thus, when Martin Luther King, Jr., was confronted with his trial sermon at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, he felt the pressure. He wrote that “I was very conscious that this time I was on trial. How could I best impress the congregation? Since the membership was educated and intelligent, should I attempt to interest it with a display of scholarship? Or should I preach just as I had always done, depending finally on the inspiration of the spirit of God. I decided to follow the latter course.”¹⁸ Preaching, therefore, plays an important role in gaining a pastorship, which is the ground floor of power in the Baptist church.

The ability to preach generates visibility and chances for upward mobility at the local, state, and national levels. At each level this ability conveys that one has been chosen by God to be a spokesperson. It enables one to connect to vast social church networks and to gain legitimacy as one climbs the pastoral ladder. As one pastor declared, “If a guy can’t preach, he can’t reach.” The overwhelming majority of NBC presidents have been renowned for their preaching ability. A black church historian revealed just how important preaching is to winning NBC’s presidency: “When you’re running for president and you go to the local circuit — both state conventions, and district, and local churches — when you go on the circuit that’s where people meet you. People don’t really want to hear what you want to do for the Convention. They’re going to invite you there to also deliver a sermon. So if the sermon doesn’t go anywhere, then there’s no way that they’re going to be able to connect with you on that. So it’s the power of rhetoric, I think, that is the key.” The ability to preach is paramount in determining who moves up the ladder in the black Baptist church and who exercises influence in the NBC.

Preaching is critical in the polity and life of the black Baptist church and the NBC. It is the main device through which charisma is unleashed, and the

18. King, *Stride toward Freedom*, p. 17.

major form of communication that connects pastors and congregations. It is the members of the community that are organized into congregations that determine who will be selected as church pastors and who will obtain major offices in the associations, state conventions, and the national convention. They do so through voting or acquiescing to the choices placed before them. The selections are heavily determined by how well the candidates are able to win over large numbers through superior preaching.

Preaching and charisma are intertwined in the black Baptist church. Weber defined charisma "as a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities."¹⁹ A person who is able to rule over others because of his charisma possesses charismatic authority. That is, for a person to have charismatic authority and to rule over others, it is crucial that followers recognize that individual as charismatic because "It is recognition on the part of those subject to authority which is decisive for the validity of charisma."²⁰ The charismatic leader is one who, because of grace, leads through inspiration and a strong magnetic personality. Thus, the charismatic leader is blessed with unique gifts unavailable to the general population. The highly successful black Baptist minister acquires charisma largely through the art of preaching.

The preacher exudes such charisma because his followers believe that God has chosen him as the instrument through which his word is to be delivered. That special gift is on display during the act of preaching. One pastor in the convention explained that preaching is "that epic moment in which the gifts that have been given by God to a particular man all come into focus, all come into perspective; the apex, the moment where people say that [this] truly is the individual that is head and shoulders above the rest. We cannot deny that here is a unique species among ourselves. It is almost assumed and presumed that the gifts automatically equate the favor of the Lord." Another leading convention pastor concurred, stating that "Preaching is words that come from God; God speaks through the Preacher." To be a great charismatic preacher, one has to be a virtuoso of this particular art form. As the Illinois state president stated, "It's not only the Scriptures or what he can say, it's how he says it and the power behind it."

The charismatic preacher is the figure that successfully connects with the audience by evoking and creatively amplifying the shared vision of the black

19. Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Free Press, 1947), p. 358.

20. Weber, *Theory*, p. 359.

Baptist community. As a church scholar argued, "The great preachers bring the followers into the rhetorical world shared by the community of followers." In that rhetorical world, people are able to draw upon messages that resonate with their daily lives. In this regard a leading NBC pastor stated that "Many times people go to church and they're depressed, they have problems that they can't find answers to. The preacher don't know that they got any kind of problems and they just preach, and they leave there relieved because the preacher said something."

Preaching, therefore, is the privileged interaction in the black Baptist church because it resonates with people's needs and culture. Our church scholar put this aspect of preaching in perspective: "People can testify to their lives being changed by the power of preaching. So that it was through the preaching event that they come to be either converted, or come to a new awareness, or that they saw things in a new way. . . . Within the African American Community 'it's my pastor said this, my pastor said that.' So that there's regular quoting of their pastor or regular quoting of some other Black preacher to a higher percentage than they would be quoting their therapist or quoting anybody else — except maybe their mother or father."

Weber argued that the visions and deeds of a charismatic leader have staying power only as long as he continues to prove himself, because "If he is for long unsuccessful, above all if his leadership fails to benefit his followers, it is likely that his charismatic authority will disappear."²¹ Black Baptist ministers connect to the welfare of the governed through the act of preaching.

The ability to preach plays an important role in whether a pastor will ascend to a top NBC position and whether he will survive in that position. For example, in order to become an NBC president one must form an election team and excel as a campaigner. He must appear before numerous religious organizations, including powerful state conventions. But it is the ability to preach at such sites that matters. An Illinois state president explained that when he invites an NBC presidential candidate to the state convention, he begins by trying "to read off his resume and they [pastors] get up and say, 'we don't need all of that, if you for him, I'll make the motion right now.' I'm like, well here's these handouts, but they're like, 'we don't need that.' To try to solidify him, I'll bring him in at the annual session and say this is the man, because sight goes better than just a name. Now if he can preach, then he's got everything in there zipped, he just hooked it up."

Maintaining power at the pinnacle of the NBC is a challenging ordeal. Internally there are numerous gifted and ambitious preachers who covet the pres-

21. Weber, *Theory*, p. 360.

idency, while externally there are forces capable of derailing one's presidency. The astute officeholder knows that the ability to maintain office depends in part on his ability to reach believers through preaching. During crises he must fend off rivals through oratory at the pulpit. The Baptist belief in grace is often the rhetorical strategy used at the pulpit by incumbents to neutralize coups and silence rivals. Our black church historian explains that

The theology of grace . . . recognizes human frailty and imperfections, human finitude; and [it] brings people into a sort of a rhetorical world where "I have failed but we all have failed, and so my mistakes and indiscretions are the mistakes and indiscretions of all humanity because of the sin of Adam." What you're doing is you're going from whatever problems you have with me — then you bring other people in to both acknowledge and affirm their own faults — and then end with "but it's by the grace of God that we are who we are." And so therefore, people are brought into that story, into that world, and they're with you now — what can they say?

Thus, in the heat of a crisis the shrewd preacher mounts the pulpit and fights his battle with the weapons of oratory and charisma. At the heart of this oratorical warfare is the idea of forgiveness.

Baptist preachers are aware of the power of oratory and charisma. An NBC pastor explained that "Preaching can get you out of almost as much trouble that you can get into. People will forgive you for stealing money, they'll forgive for adultery. . . . But they'll forgive you for anything, but if you can't preach, if you can't preach you're in trouble." Joseph Jackson, who served as NBC's president for twenty-nine years, was renowned for utilizing the pulpit to maintain power. The current pastor of Jackson's historic church notes that "Dr. Jackson was a tremendous orator; you'll hear many things about him, but you'll never hear anyone say that he couldn't preach. As a matter of fact there were several elections where organizational coups were afloat, and they were ready to work. And literally the brethren for years said whatever you do, do not let the brother take the microphone and talk." He said one coup attempt was working until "they let him mount the pulpit, and after the Sunday morning sermon, that was reversed and they were excommunicated and the right hand of fellowship was rescinded. There's power there, no one can explain it. Like the Bible says, it's through the foolishness of preaching that God has chosen to confound the wise."

Preaching is the main source through which charisma is able to flow and shape the very structure of black Baptist churches and the NBC. As Lincoln and Mamiya concluded, "from their beginning in the invisible 'institution' of slave

religion, African Americans have invested far more authority in the charismatic personality of the preacher than in any organizational forms of bureaucratic hierarchy."²² This tradition has produced important charismatic leaders including Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jesse Jackson. As we will argue later, it has also produced problems of accountability, inefficiency, and scandals in the NBC.

Above we have attempted to lay bare the cultural underpinnings of the NBC, and the black Baptist community it reflects. Because worship styles and music are also important components of this cultural world, they will be considered when we analyze the NBC and its organizational environment. We turn now to the gender and age hierarchies that are deeply embedded in the NBC.

Gender and the NBC

African American men and women have been the architects of the NBC. However, the relationship between men and women in the NBC has been characterized by deep inequality for well over a century. In the NBC men set policy, exercise power, and lead the convention. Women have functioned in vital support roles that enable the NBC to stay afloat and achieve its goals. Without this support system the NBC would not be able to pursue its multiple goals. Yet gender inequality and occupational-based sex segregation are built into the very structure of the NBC.

Throughout the NBC's history women have constituted its core of infrastructure workers. Lincoln and Mamiya captured the nature of this work: "Women serve in myriad roles in black churches as evangelists, missionaries, stewardesses, deaconesses, lay readers, writers on religious subjects, Sunday school teachers, musicians, choir members and directors, ushers, nurses, custodians, caterers and hostesses for church dinners, secretaries and clerks, counselors, recreation leaders and Directors of Vacation Bible Schools."²³ Fund-raising is another crucial role that women have performed for the NBC.²⁴ Thus, women have raised the bulk of the money supplied to the NBC's Foreign Mission Board. For example, the executive secretary of this board related that while doing work in Malawi, West Africa, he "found out that five out of ten pregnant women were dying in childbirth and six out of ten babies were dying before they were one year of age if their mother couldn't give them breast milk." The

22. Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, p. 14.

23. Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, p. 275.

24. See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), and Ethel M. Gordon, *Unfinished Business* (Detroit: Harlo Press, 1976).

NBC was challenged to confront this situation because they had a mission located there. A great deal of money was needed to address this catastrophe, and it was the women who generated it. The executive secretary recalled: "I led a group of our ladies over there and the women were so impressed with the need. They said what can we do? I said maybe we can start a hospital or clinic. They said that we'll try to help you raise money, I said alright. We found out that we could build a seventeen bed hospital for one hundred and ninety five thousand dollars. . . . So they gave me the first sixty-five thousand of the one hundred and ninety five thousand dollars it cost and we built the seventeen bed hospital."

Women play dominant roles in executing the programs of black Baptist churches and the NBC. This is true, in large part, because the sexual division of labor in these institutions funnels women into support work. However, it is also the case demographically, because women far outnumber men in black Baptist churches and the NBC. Higginbotham found that as early as 1916, women constituted "more than 60 percent of the NBC's membership."²⁵ This gender imbalance has increased through time. After documenting this phenomenon in the 1980s, Lincoln and Mamiya concluded: "Any casual observer of a Sunday worship service in the typical black church is immediately struck by the predominance of female members. Depending on the congregation, between 66 to 80 percent of its membership is usually composed of women. In our survey of 2,150 churches male membership averaged 30 percent. There are about 2.5–3 females to every male member."²⁶ As we will demonstrate, gender segregation and inequality are responsible for women performing support work throughout the infrastructure of the NBC.

Evidence demonstrates that black women continue to perform largely support roles in the NBC. When the major offices of the NBC are examined, it becomes clear that in terms of leadership and power the convention is a bastion of patriarchy. In 1998 there were twenty-one convention officers, which included the president and vice presidents. A woman did not fill any of those positions. The Executive Committee consisted of fifteen positions, and a woman filled only one of those, and that was because she served as the president of the convention's Woman's Auxiliary. Men held all the board positions, including chairman, vice chairman, and secretary. Of thirty-eight board members at large, none were women. The Executive Board consisted of fifty-six members, with only seven being women, because of their position in the Woman's Auxiliary and the Ushers' and Nurses' Auxiliary.²⁷

25. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, p. 166.

26. Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, p. 304.

27. 1998 *Annual Report*.

The NBC is organized around its major missions, auxiliaries, and congresses. These spheres of activity include the Foreign Mission Board, the Home Mission Board, the Sunday School Publishing Board, the Evangelism Board, the Congress of Christian Education, the Ushers' and Nurses' Auxiliary, and the Woman's Auxiliary. No women occupy positions of power on NBC's major boards, except those segregated along gender lines. This is striking, because historically women have been particularly active in the work of foreign and home missions, and in evangelism and Christian education. For example, while women constitute the majority of Sunday school teachers, none serve on the eleven-member Sunday School Publishing Board. The activities of NBC's Ushers' and Nurses' Auxiliary and Woman's Auxiliary have been viewed and treated as "women's work." Thus, in 1998, nineteen of twenty-three board members of the ushers' and nurses' group were women, including its president. Likewise, women filled all sixteen positions on the Woman's Auxiliary Board. The NBC is permeated with gender inequality rooted in sex segregation. The convention is governed largely by one gender — males.

The root causes of NBC's gender hierarchy are apparent. As we argued earlier, the way to achieve power in the black Baptist community is to become a pastor. This avenue is usually closed to women at the point of entry and in terms of mentoring. Ultimately women are excluded from the pulpit where pastoral power is enshrined.

The overwhelming majority of black Baptist clergy do not believe that God intended for women to be ordained as pastors. That is, they oppose the ordination of women on scriptural grounds. This is the rationale they give. Whether it is the only one or even their main motivation will be discussed shortly. The point here is that this gendered view of ordination is the major barrier erected in the path of women seeking to become preachers and pastors.

Earlier we discussed "the calling" that members of the black Baptist community view as the personal contact God establishes with an individual he wants to preach his Word. The calling is the first rung on the ladder toward a pastorship. Having received the call, the neophyte alerts pastoral authorities of the blessed event with the hope that these elders will set in motion the process through which he can climb to a pastorship. The next step is the trial sermon, where the elders and members of the congregation decide whether the call is authentic based on the preaching ability of the candidate. For the neophyte the event of the calling is a time of great stress and uncertainty. Even in the best of situations one cannot be sure that the call will be judged as authentic.

Women seldom experience this anxiety because their claim will almost certainly be met with skepticism. In fact, women are usually discouraged from pursuing their calling. A female pastor, attorney, and former leader of a major

national civil rights organization experienced the call to the ministry. She relates the following: "Certainly women are not given the pastoral option. There's a glass ceiling; it's not even glass, it's a ceiling that you're expected to accept and in due season if you faint not, it will change. Even to acknowledge your calling, there are few men who will at least give you normal encouragement but most you can't even talk to them." She pointed out that when women receive the call, they usually "go to the pastor and try to share this common experience and would be rejected at that level."

Gender inequality at this entry point is substantial. The president of the NBC's Young Pastors and Ministers Department addresses this inequality: "We would take the testimony of a ten year old boy who says he was called to preach; with no experience, no base, no knowledge and put him up with pride . . . and say 'God called him'; and take a woman who's had experience with God, walked with God, has integrity with God and say God can't ever do that. . . . What are we saying?" Similarly, after examining the historical record, black womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant concluded that "in addition to not being granted ordination, the authenticity of 'the call' of women was frequently put to the test."²⁸ The result is that many women fail to even consider the ministry as an option.

Mentoring is crucial to landing a pastorate. The neophyte is usually taken under the wings of an experienced pastor and taught the secrets of the trade. One of NBC's leading pastors spoke to the role of mentoring: "I love young preachers, and the reason I love them so much is because I caught so much hell when I was a young preacher. . . . Now I'm appreciative of it and if a young preacher comes in here and tells me, Pastor, I've been called to preach. Alright, I'll find a date to let you acknowledge it and preach your trial sermon." The mentor usually informs the candidate that "if you go to school I'll help you, if a church becomes vacant I'll try to get you in there." However, this mentoring is not available to women when a pastor does not believe God calls them to preach.

The mentoring process also teaches a new round of young male clergy to keep the pastoral doors closed to women. A state president was asked how he would respond to a highly qualified woman who wanted him to serve as her mentor. He replied: "I would tell her she could work under me, but at this time our church and this pastor does not support women ministers." An NBC pastor who mentored and licensed over thirty-five ministers admits that many years ago he licensed a woman to preach, but has since reevaluated his position. He stated, "I don't do that any more nor do I ordain women and there have been

28. Jacquelyn Grant, "Black Theology and the Black Woman," in *Black Theology*, p. 425.

women who left this church because they felt a call and they wanted to be ordained, and I sent them to friends of mine who ordain women.” When he trains his male mentorees, he counsels them “that women are not to be ordained into the pastoral ministry.” Women, therefore, are usually excluded from the pastoral mentoring process while men are coached and encouraged to keep the club all male. One pastor recalls that he would have had to pay a steep price at his own ordination if he supported women, because “One of the questions on the ordination was ‘would I ordain a woman preacher?’ All of these old preachers were there. So if I would have said yes, I wouldn’t have got my papers.”

In many black Baptist churches women are not allowed at the pulpit. Jacquelyn Grant revealed that on one occasion she approached a pulpit to place a tape recorder on the lectern but “was stopped by a man who informed me that I could not enter the pulpit area. When I asked why not he directed me to the pastors who told me that women were not permitted in the pulpit.”²⁹ Similarly, an ordained female minister related that when she accompanied her pastor to a revival, she was reminded of how male ministers prevented women from reaching the pulpit. She recalled that “when my pastor was taken up to the pulpit the pastor of the church told me to sit down on the ground level.”

Thus, in the NBC and many black Baptist churches, women are not recognized as pastors and may be blocked physically from entering the pulpit. A leading pastor of the convention put it this way: “Number one, the National Baptist Convention was put together by preachers, men. Women are out of place preaching. Most Baptists . . . do not recognize women as preachers and pastors; I’m one of them, I don’t recognize them. . . . If a woman head toward my pulpit up there, ushers would be running from every direction. . . . They don’t come up there [to the pulpit]. They ain’t got no business up there to do nothing but clean it up. They’re not allowed in the pulpit.”

The barriers to the pulpit and pastorate function to limit the number of women available to serve as role models. This situation was clearly revealed in our interview with the editor of the *Baptist Advocate*. Below is a portion of that interview:

EDITOR: I know a lot of Baptist churches do not condone female ministers, do not allow them in their pulpit and things of that nature.

INTERVIEWER: What’s your church’s stance on that?

EDITOR: They’re not allowed in the pulpit, they’re not recognized.

INTERVIEWER: So you’ve never seen in your pulpit a woman preacher?

EDITOR: Oh no.

29. Grant, “Black Theology,” p. 426.

INTERVIEWER: And how long have you been going to that church?

EDITOR: All my life.

INTERVIEWER: So you're telling me that you have never ever seen a woman stand behind that pulpit in a service and say anything.

EDITOR: No.

The NBC is a thoroughly gendered institution. Men wield power. Women follow and engage in support work.

Widespread gender inequality in black Baptist churches is rooted in theological views, the family metaphor, and male privilege. There exists a range of views regarding gender among the Black male clergy. The "ultraconservatives" argue that women are not supposed to preach or pastor churches under any circumstances. The "moderates" argue that, as far as they understand the Scriptures, women are not to be pastors, although they are open to that possibility if a convincing scriptural case can be made for gender equality. The "radicals" argue that men and women are equally qualified to preach and pastor. In their view male clergy are opposed to women pastoring because they wish to protect their own self-interests. In the black Baptist church and the NBC, the ultraconservatives and moderates are clearly the dominant and most powerful groups.

Both conservatives and moderates argue that the Bible and Jesus' behavior demonstrated that women are not to be ordained as preachers and pastors. They embrace Paul's view, which states, "Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent" (1 Tim. 2:11-12). One NBC pastor explained that he is opposed to the ordination of women because "I take Paul literally, that women ought to be silent in the church. . . . It was critical for me to read the Scriptures for myself to be clear about the distinction that God has made as it relates to their [women's] roles." An Illinois State Convention president concurred: "My stance on it is that I don't have Scriptural substantiation that women have a calling in the ministry." Another leading convention pastor spoke clearly about the issue: "You can't find nothing in the Bible that would substantiate their call. The Lord never even alluded to women leading men, and if you're going to preach and pastor you're gonna be in a leadership position so you'll be leading me — women are not supposed to lead men; read your Bible." Another Illinois State Convention president put it this way: "I can speak for the majority of pastors in the Convention that we do not ascribe to women preachers based on the Bible, nothing else, purely the Bible. . . . We cannot find it in the Bible. . . . We feel that it is a divine call of God directed at men."

The perceived gender-relevant behavior of Jesus is also cited as proof that women are unfit for the ministry. That is, some pastors argue that Jesus ap-

pointed only men to ministerial positions. Thus, the above Illinois State Convention president continues, "Jesus had a lot of women around him but he never called one of them to be his disciples, he had 12. . . . I mean in his circle, there were 12 men." Another former Illinois State Convention president agreed: "Spiritually, I look back at the New Testament Church which we are a part of. I look at Jesus making his assignments and I look at who he put in leadership; I follow the same trend." The majority of NBC pastors embrace the view that the Holy Word requires that women not be ordained.³⁰ They feel that Christ led the way by appointing a male regime to preach the Word of God.

This male-centered theology has come under attack. Radical theologians, especially black womanist theologians, argue that there exist biblical texts which suggest that God does not make gender distinctions. According to this view, Jesus was far more liberal than Paul, and he surrounded himself with powerful women who could lay down the Word. A basic challenge confronts the conservative male-centered theology. Namely, there are Scriptures maintaining that slaves should obey their masters. If black male clergy believe only in the literal interpretation of the Bible, why did they employ religion to attack slavery and racial oppression? As the seminary president we interviewed argues, the critics maintain that they want "to critique 1st Timothy and say we need to argue with that Scripture, just as Black male ministers argued that the writings in Philemon and other places that condone slavery — we certainly critiqued those. How is it that we draw a line when it comes to the issue of gender judgments?"

These theological debates, coupled with women's demographic strength, have led some pastors to entertain the possibility that Scriptures can be interpreted to support gender equality. One pastor states: "I guess my problem is I think personally I'm open to it [women pastors]. . . . I would like it to be so; it would be easier for me. I'm having problems with the Scriptures though." Another pastor reflected this wait-and-see attitude regarding gender when he related that "I truly desire to know what is God's will and to do it." Thus, the moderates are open to theological debates on the role of women in the ministry. In the meantime, they practice gender exclusion with respect to preaching and pastoring.

The family metaphor directly affects gender inequality in the black Baptist church. It is relevant to a contemporary sociological fact. In particular, women head a large percentage of African American families. Such households are often viewed as "broken" and are contrasted unfavorably with the "normal" two-parent household usually "headed" by a father. In the black church family there are few broken homes because the father is almost always on the throne.

30. See Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in African American Experience*.

Our seminary president identified the connection between the current state of the black family and the metaphorical church family:

With the kind of fragility of Black families in the post Slavery era there's been such a yearning for a strong Black male presence that there's been a kind of diffuse cultural appreciation for African American patriarchy and a lot of people, even women surprisingly, are willing to permit that even if it constricted their own leadership aspirations because we all wanted to restore Black families and restore strong Black fathers and Black men. So I think that family dynamic as a kind of psychosocial dynamic is as significant as the biblical textual issues.

Thus, in search of black strength, the religious family "repairs" the frailties of the sociological family, but in so doing helps produce gender inequality in the black church.

In this case the church family metaphor has generated a life of its own. Gender inequality in the church is avoided because of its perceived negative consequences for the black community. This view was vividly stated by a convention pastor when he was asked whether he would support the idea of female pastors. He said, "I mean I could foresee the time where I could have women standing in the pulpit, that wouldn't make me no difference. But I mean when it comes to the family, the household of faith, I just don't see a Scriptural compromise that its O.K. for that family to be represented locally as a dysfunctional female-headed household."

Pastors who advocate complete gender equality in the Baptist church argue that it is male privilege, rather than Scriptures, that constitutes the major barrier to women becoming pastors. These pastors, who are clearly a minority, support the ordination of women, and some have ordained women pastors. They are aware that most male pastors have theological difficulties regarding the ordination of women. However, they maintain that these difficulties are rooted in earthly power structures and vested interests. A former general secretary of the NBC made this case: "I think beyond that, their objections would be influenced by the same thing that influenced folks who owned slaves, to want to read the Bible in such a way that maintained support for slaves because it's not in their economic or positional interests to free folks. And so for men to affirm women in ministry creates a situation where they bring another level of competition for pastorates and leadership positions that they don't have to deal with." This position stresses the role of sexism in the black church.

An elder statesman within the NBC identified the role that sexism plays in the black church. When asked why male clergy resist the ordination of women,

he replied, "Because they are not used to accepting women in that vein; real macho. . . . You have to rise above sexism." He added, "I don't go about trying to prove it by Scripture, I really don't; I'm just comfortable about it." When asked how long it would take for ministers to support women's ordination in the NBC, he concluded that "it's gonna take us a long time. I did my first one 45 years ago."

In the meantime, the NBC is an overwhelmingly patriarchal institution in which men rule over a membership that is predominately female. The female pastor, the attorney and civil rights leader we interviewed, summed up the situation: "I have never felt this level of discrimination in any of the professions I have been in. . . . The ministry is the most oppressive of professions that I have ever been in."

Age Hierarchy

Elder members largely attend the annual meeting of the NBC. The meeting convenes the first week of September, when school-age children and their parents are usually unable to attend because it coincides with the first week of school. This timing is reflective of the fact that convention pastors are relatively old. In the view of the young pastors, there is a rigid age hierarchy that prevents them from being heard and making meaningful contributions. One of the founders of the recently begun Young Pastors and Ministers Department related how young people felt alienated from the convention. When he attended the annual meeting, he discovered that "Most of the people who were on the Convention stage were of great senior years. . . . In that same session that we were being birthed [Young Pastors Department], the AARP was making a presentation — Association for Retired Persons — and they asked 'all the people in the room who are retired persons or senior citizens to stand.' It looked like 80% if not 90% of the Convention floor stood. And this was at the President's Annual Address so it was very full." Younger members complain that senior members, nestled within a paternalistic hierarchical structure, govern the affairs of the denomination.

Young pastors argue that those in NBC's power structures believe that young people should be silent and patient if they wish to ascend the rungs of power. The president of the Illinois State Convention stated that the attitude toward young pastors in the NBC is that "you ain't got nothing to say, you don't know nothing!" Another young NBC pastor said that "if you got up and challenged the King's authority in the meeting, you were almost marked forever." A respected, senior NBC pastor agreed that young people may not always get a hearing, but added: "I think it would be logical that it takes time to win the con-

fidence and trust of people. You just didn't do it overnight. A young fellow may be ever so popular in a certain area — but it takes time to make good wine; yes it does." In the NBC the rule is that you must come up through the ranks. This age-graded hierarchy poses a number of problems. They include concerns about whether the institution allows new ideas to enter through younger generations, whether the NBC will maintain a vibrant culture capable of attracting succeeding generations, and whether the convention will be able to make the transitions required of an institution that is part of a world undergoing a technological revolution.

NBC and Its Environment

All major institutions are situated in complex relationships with other institutions and societal actors. The NBC is no exception, for it must interact with the state, the legal system, the media, and financial institutions including corporations and banks. The NBC also interacts with other religious denominations, especially other African American denominations and religious bodies. The institutions and organizations the convention must interact with constitute the NBC's external environment. Indeed, its environment influences the overall status of the NBC significantly. Most complex organizations interact through routine bureaucratic channels, and they employ skilled professionals, who navigate them through their environments. Such institutions operate as organizational actors circumscribed by formal rules of engagement. In contrast, the NBC is a large organization, but views itself as a family. This identity affects how the NBC responds to its environment, which became painfully evident during a major public scandal in 1997. An examination of that scandal, and its aftermath, brings NBC's environment and its internal dynamics into clear focus.

In 1994 the NBC elected Dr. Henry Lyons of St. Petersburg, Florida, as its new president. This charismatic orator ran on a platform of raising NBC's standards. He was the first president to serve under a tenure rule that limits a president to an initial five-year term, followed by another five years if reelected. After the second term, he would not be eligible to run for another five years. Lyons's supporters and critics agree that he instituted significant and progressive changes in the NBC. He is credited with decreasing NBC's debt during the first several years of his presidency, increasing democratic participation, reducing the degree of age discrimination, and instituting programs designed to address critical problems of the African American community. Because of his charisma, the power of his office, and reasons already cited regarding the NBC presidency, Lyons was given the latitude to pursue his vision of the NBC.

In March of 1999 Lyons resigned from the presidency because of a public scandal that threatened to destroy the NBC. The scandal was of Lyons's own making, for he used his NBC office to negotiate bogus deals with corporations seeking to profit from millions of NBC members. These deals generated millions of dollars, some of which Lyons used for personal ends. Lyons also pocketed several hundred thousand dollars donated by the Anti-Defamation League to rebuild black churches. Evidence emerged showing he used funds to finance his own lavish lifestyle and those of several mistresses. He was vigorously investigated and prosecuted by state and federal officials.

In February of 1999 an all-white Florida jury convicted Lyons on state charges of racketeering and grand theft. Initially the federal government leveled fifty-four federal charges against Lyons, which eventually led him to plead guilty to two federal charges of fraud and income tax evasion. On March 17, 1999, Lyons resigned the presidency and was sentenced to jail to serve five and a half years for his crimes. The scandal was especially detrimental to the NBC because it was widely covered in local and national media and debated in religious and secular venues.

NBC's organizational environment was central to the scandal. External corporations, the legal system, and media were all crucial actors in the drama. Corporations (e.g., credit card companies, banks, insurance companies, and funeral homes) are especially interested in the NBC and its presidency because of the purchasing potential of NBC's constituency. A high-ranking pastor in Lyons's administration stated that "the moment a man gets announced that he is president, all your big corporations go after him and try to get him." The dominant actor, who negotiates with corporations on behalf of the NBC, is the president rather than attorneys, accountants, and business specialists. Lyons's general secretary confirmed that "the Convention allowed the president latitude to be the president and to pursue the vision that the president had." As a result, Lyons entered into legally risky deals with corporations in which he received millions of dollars that he was left free to distribute as he saw fit. Structurally, the office of the president provided Lyons the room to generate money for the convention. It was the lack of effective checks and balances that enabled Lyons to use funds to support his own shortcomings.

Despite its familial tendencies, the NBC is a legal entity that functions within a legal context. State and federal agencies investigated Lyons vigorously once the allegations surfaced. Vast resources of the state were utilized to ferret out Lyons's secret bank accounts, forged signatures, and distorted information that he provided to corporations. A state judge set the tone for Lyons's trial, and a state jury was empowered to judge the allegations swirling around the charismatic pastor.

The scandal was good copy for local and national media. The local *St. Petersburg Times* covered the scandal extensively, providing a blow-by-blow account of the embarrassing sex and theft allegations. National print media, including the *Washington Post*, assisted in bringing national attention to the scandal, while national television networks competed for an interview with Lyons to expose the sensational scandal. Thus, the *St. Petersburg Times* reported that "For months, the major networks have angled for interviews with Lyons. Producers from 60 Minutes II and Dateline NBC and the Today Show and Barbara Walters all took turns courting Lyons and his legal team."³¹ Two days before Lyons pleaded guilty to the federal charges, he appeared on ABC's *20/20* and confessed that he had disgraced the black church and the black community.

The scandal reveals that the organizational environment of the NBC mattered a great deal. Corporations created the opportunities for the scandal, while the media made it visible for the nation to view. The legal system was the final arbiter, which sealed Lyons's fate and propelled the convention down an uncharted path. However, the NBC's power structure did not surrender voluntarily to the bureaucratic institutions in the NBC's environment. They had a defense all their own.

Internally, the family metaphor provided the lens through which the scandal was understood and Lyons defended. When the details of the scandal emerged, the power structure lined up in support of the president. The view emerged among Lyons's supporters that he had acted no differently than his predecessors. That is, Lyons was viewed as a president who entered into lucrative agreements with corporations to defray debts owed by NBC and to sponsor its programs. If in the process he enhanced his own personal finances, that was not viewed as out of bounds.

The prevailing view of the NBC's board and key supporters, many of whom had been appointed by the president, was that Lyons did not commit any wrongdoings against the convention. Hence, they passionately supported Lyons and urged him not to resign. As his general secretary put it: "The Convention at no point accused Dr. Lyons of any wrongdoing. The Convention never joined forces with the state and claim[ed] itself to be a victim of the leadership. In fact, the Convention voted [in] session in Denver that it did not consider itself to be a victim in any way in relationship to leadership." Similarly, another convention pastor said he "could not think of anything [Lyons] did under their administration that the previous presidents did not have the authority to do. Lyons is free to broker deals with corporations, and is just as free to richly profit from those

31. David Barstow, "On TV, Lyons Says: 'Let's Get On with It,'" *St. Petersburg Times Online*, March 16, 1999.

deals." Publicly, the elected and appointed leadership stood behind Lyons during the scandal, viewing him rather than the convention as the victim.

The delicate issue of Lyons's involvement with mistresses was viewed as family business, of no concern to the convention or the general public. A leading NBC pastor summed up this view: "My position is I'm a member of the Convention. Now what he did with his personal life is no concern of mine. . . . That was the general opinion of the whole Convention." Even after he was convicted, some NBC leaders maintained that Lyons should remain as NBC president. Lyons's vice president and interim successor stated that "if he can live with it, I can live with it."

During the trial, supporters argued that Lyons was the victim of a racist white media and a racist justice system. A leading pastor of the convention, E. V. Hill, argued that Lyons was convicted by "an unjust verdict produced by a racist criminal justice system in Pinellas County." Hill then invoked the family requirements of the metaphor when he stated, "when your brother is in the muck and the mire, you try to drop everything to help."³² Critics of Lyons were viewed as disloyal family members. As a black scholar told us, Lyons's attackers were portrayed as hostile white outsiders, which led the president's supporters to call for a closing of the ranks because "We can't let them tell us what to do. In the sense that this is in-house family business and you don't let strangers come into your family and tell you what to do. No, the family needs to decide what we need to do."

Internally, then, Lyons's supporters promoted the view that the scandal was unjust because Lyons's behavior was consistent with presidential authority. Likewise, NBC's leadership viewed the behavior of the state and the media as hostile attacks on family sovereignty. This familial way of acting even manifested itself in Lyons's legal defense. An NBC-related home page stated that "Rev. Lyons's attorneys posed the defense that the traditions of the Black church gave Lyons an unusually broad range of powers that may seem at odds with larger society. . . . Lyons's supporters argued that the black church simply entrusts their leaders with a broad range of powers that is seldom understood by outside institutions."³³

The white judge and jury rejected the "special family" defense. The family metaphor could not withstand the power of the state and the glare of the media. Yet, within the church the family metaphor had not lost all of its appeal, for

32. David Barstow, "Lyons, Directors to Meet to Consider Options," *St. Petersburg Times Online*, March 3, 1999.

33. Religious Movement Homepage: National Baptist convention, USA, http://cti.itc.virginia.edu/~jkh8x/soc257/nrms/nbc_usa.html.

as Lyons was carted to jail the members of his congregation debated his future role at the church. They decided that he would remain in an honorable position at Bethel Metropolitan Baptist Church. A local Lyons supporter, Rev. Manuel Sykes, explained: "The Church is a family. It is so much more than an organization. . . . The pastor is seen as the father figure of that family, especially when they have been there as long as Lyons has. . . . The work of the pastor is about putting lives back together. When he stumbles or has a problem in his life that is no time to abandon him."³⁴ The Lyons scandal constituted a pivotal moment for the NBC, forcing both its leadership and lay members to look deep within the convention in order to chart its future.

Contemporary Challenges

Many challenges face the NBC as it struggles to address persistent problems and recover from the Lyons scandal. In his first annual address, newly elected NBC president Dr. William Shaw outlined the problems faced by the NBC following the scandal. After characterizing the scandal as a "mirror moment," Shaw stated:

And we need to look in the mirror of God's Word and will and when we look there, ours is an unpleasant sight. Behold some of our disfigurements. . . . This administration inherited debt and litigation that have been staggering, \$900,000 mortgage past due, unpaid bills and accounts in excess of a quarter of a million dollars plus . . . ; another \$100,000 plus through the Congress of Christian Education; more than 5 lawsuits and litigation — that's not a pleasant picture. Structurally, we've been a Convention where units have not met and planned together. We've had financial systems without checks and balances, individuals who have treated their part of the Convention as individual fiefdoms, resisting any authority but their own. What we see is not pleasant.³⁵

In this concluding section we address major challenges facing the NBC, including the threat of religious alternatives, its loose organizational structure and imperial presidency, its barriers to democratic participation, its stifling age hierarchy, its problematic environmental relationships, its relative inability to address the social conditions of African Americans, and its gender inequality.

34. Twila Decker, "Attorney Says Lyons Will Retain a Role with Church," *St. Petersburg Times Online*, April 2, 1999.

35. William J. Shaw, "A Mirror Moment," Presidential Address, National Baptist Convention, Los Angeles, September 2000.

There are other religious faiths capable of attracting NBC members if this convention fails to satisfy its constituency. This is especially true for other black religious communities whose core beliefs do not differ fundamentally from those of black Baptists. NBC's new president alluded to this threat when he warned: "We grow and have believers birthed who are not fed and do not grow and do not mature, and as soon as any strange movement comes by they come to our place and find ready converts because they don't know where they are and don't know what they believe."³⁶ Most of NBC's competitors are not strange at all. Indeed, some of them are capable of providing a real alternative to the NBC. This is especially the case if they embrace contemporary music as well as attractive worship styles. Because music and worship style are second only to preaching in the Baptist church, they require examination.

Competition in the religious economy forces institutions to appeal successfully to some segment of the religious market or slide into oblivion.³⁷ Recent cultural developments endanger the NBC's dominant position among African American Christians. For much of the twentieth century the convention had been the largest black denomination and the largest organization of African Americans in existence. Most NBC officials proclaim its membership to include over 30,000 churches and around 8.5 million members. Lincoln and Mamiya say over 30,000 churches, 29,000 clergy, and almost 8 million members are affiliated with the convention.³⁸ Because no precise membership data exist, these numbers may inflate NBC's numerical strength. Moreover, the NBC membership may be in a state of decline. During the 1999 annual meeting Virginia's state president Geoffrey Guns described several challenges to the NBC, including negative church growth in rural areas and the gradual movement toward minimal church growth at large. A recent NBC annual report confirms Guns's contention by listing fewer than 26,000 churches that officially registered with the convention in 1998. Though some argue that official registration is not a prerequisite for convention participation, this low number presents a formidable challenge to the convention's claim of 30,000 churches.

Religious institutions must be able to adapt to changes to remain relevant in the religious economy. Some NBC pastors attribute their decline to the convention's inability to adjust to new developments in the African American religious milieu. As one pastor put it: "Historically, the convention had a signifi-

36. Shaw, "A Mirror Moment."

37. See Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, "Religious Economies and Sacred Canopies: Religious Mobilization in American Cities," *American Sociological Review* 53 (February 1988): 41-49; and Finke and Stark, *The Churched of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

38. Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, p. 31.

cant role in the lives of Baptist congregants but I think that its role has not changed with time and so it is not relevant to youth and young adults and certainly not to the Baby Boomer generation that I am a part of." Our church historian contended that many NBC churches are locked in a traditional mid-twentieth-century church culture that impedes them from competing with a vibrant neo-Pentecostal style of worship, increasingly popular among African American Christians. Churches that are able to adjust are thriving while others are in decline. As an example, he offered: "Clay Evans moved into some of that [neo-Pentecostal worship style], as opposed to Olivet, Monumental, and Pilgrim who did not, and therefore, Clay Evans sees over a thousand people on Sunday morning but Olivet, Monumental, and Pilgrim, who used to see thousands of people, if they can see a couple of hundred they're happy." Lincoln and Mamiya also contend that neo-Pentecostalism, in mainline African American churches, elicits rapid growth in membership: "The challenge which neo-Pentecostalism poses for the Black Church is real, and the issue of how to benefit from this potential of church growth and spiritual revitalization without alienating the pillars of normative tradition . . . and without producing a crisis of schism is a challenge most black churches must inevitably address."³⁹

This challenge to the NBC is evidenced in a recent movement called the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship, founded by its presiding bishop, Paul Morton. Morton was an NBC pastor. In 1993 he developed a fellowship of Baptist churches that are sympathetic to a neo-Pentecostal style of worship, as opposed to the traditional mode that existed at the NBC annual meetings. As another NBC pastor describes it: "It began because there has always existed in the Baptist communion those with an appetite for a more spiritual, demonstrative type of worship style. Historically those individuals have been heavily influenced by the Pentecostal tradition and yet have remained within the Baptist communion and in many respects the worship style has been stifled in the Baptist witness. So Bishop Morton really tapped into kind of a sleeping giant in terms of the vastness that really wanted to move in that particular direction." More than thirty thousand people attended the first Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship meeting in 1994. Since then, almost a thousand churches have joined the fellowship, posing a threat to the NBC, which has lost churches to this movement.

The Full Gospel group also attracts younger pastors from the NBC who are frustrated by the age hierarchy that thwarts their full participation in positions of leadership in the convention. When asked if there would ever be an opportunity for a forty-two-year-old like himself to take his energy and ideas on a national level in other traditional black denominations, a Full Gospel pastor re-

39. Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, p. 388.

plied: "No. That's why the Full Gospel has come together so I won't have to wait until I get old. The Bible says that I'm supposed to serve God in my youth. I still have enough energy to do many things; I'd rather not have to wait until I'm old." The new fellowship offers young pastors the immediate opportunity to lead as national bishops, regional and state bishops, and in other positions of influence, as opposed to the time-consuming process of coming up through the ranks in the NBC.

To thwart the profusion of young pastors defecting with their churches to Morton's new fellowship, Lyons formed the Young Pastors and Ministers Department in 1996. Pastor Steve Bland, Jr., was elected president and has led the new auxiliary as a vital force in the convention, with a current membership of almost 2,100 pastors and ministers. He explained: "We've been building the convention; bringing people back to the convention that have been either idle, or left, and offering things that will help the convention as a whole." However, the future of the Young Pastors Department is uncertain because it is dependent on the prerogatives of the new president.

Lyons's administration was responsible for innovative changes, but his scandal-ended presidency obscures the real positive contribution he made to the religious life of the NBC. The crucial question concerning the NBC's survival is whether or not the newly elected president, William Shaw, will continue to provide the necessary innovation for the NBC to be relevant in a changing twenty-first-century religious climate. As the president of the Young Pastors Department put it: "I believe if it turns its back on [change] now, you will see a death like you never thought it would see before because there are too many movements on the horizon now that can easily take its place."

The Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC) is another one of the movements that compete with the NBC for its market share among African American Christians. A cadre of disgruntled NBC pastors founded the PNBC in 1961, with the goal to organize a more socially active black Baptist movement in support of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Civil Rights movement. Their recent appointment of Dr. Hycel Taylor as chairman of the Resolution Committee is a strong attempt to put the PNBC's focus back toward its original mission. As he told us: "My challenge to them [PNBC] is that they have gone back to being exactly like the National Baptist Convention — they come and preach and eat and go back home and do nothing. This year we're trying to put the PNBC back into the course of what it came into being for: mainly, as a religious dimension for social action." Although the PNBC's numerical growth does not pose as serious a threat as the Full Gospel Baptist movement, its resurgent progressivism may provide the kind of national exposure that could attract younger pastors away from the NBC.

The enormous popularity of independent African American megachurch ministries like that of T. D. Jakes also poses a severe threat to attendance at national meetings. Jakes is an internationally known pastor and best-selling author who conducts nationwide conferences that draw up to fifty thousand people. The church historian we interviewed said, "Jakes is a phenomenon all by himself; no one has reached his heights. We have not had anyone like Jakes previously." The Black Muslim movement is also a growing threat to NBC because of its recent attractiveness to segments of the black religious community.

Such interdenominational ministries as Jakes's, and other rising independent movements, not only challenge the vitality of the NBC, but they also confirm the prediction of one of the most distinguished black Baptist preachers, of a diminished role for all denominations in the future: "I think convention life among blacks and whites is under assault now. American Baptists are having their problems, Southern Baptists are having their problems; we're in a mood where convention life is not nearly as significant as it once was. . . . I think conventions will continue for the foreseeable future to have a reduced popularity and attractiveness to people."

Musicologist Eileen Southern maintains that the NBC's public endorsement was a leading factor contributing to gospel music becoming mainstream in black churches nationwide.⁴⁰ The early leading gospel stars such as Mahalia Jackson, Sallie Martin, the Ward Singers, Thomas Dorsey, Kenneth Morris, James Cleveland, and numerous quartets were Baptists and reached national acclaim by performing at annual meetings. In the 1960s the NBC's dominance in this area steadily declined, while black Pentecostals began to dominate gospel music through the 1970s and part of the 1980s. As Lincoln and Mamiya note: "The Church of God in Christ, more than any other single denomination has pioneered the creation of contemporary Gospel. It produced such performers as the Hawkins Singers, Andrae Crouch and the Clark Sisters, and their influence has been such that every contemporary gospel choir of whatever church is almost inevitably brushed with elements of Pentecostalism through its music and its performance practices."⁴¹ Contemporary gospel music has undergone changes in the past decade, with both the NBC and the Church of God in Christ taking a backseat to independent charismatic/Pentecostal churches.

Gospel music has reached an all-time high in popularity because of artists like Kirk Franklin, who produced an unprecedented three platinum albums. The Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship, T. D. Jakes, and other independent ministries like Bishop Carlton Pearson's Azusa Fellowship appear to be

40. Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans* (New York: Norton, 1997).

41. Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, p. 368.

more successful at drawing young adults than the NBC, by featuring popular black gospel singers including Fred Hammond, Donnie McClurkin, Karen Clark-Sheard, the Winans family, Yolanda Adams, and other leading artists at their conventions. The NBC must also respond to the changing nature of gospel music or lose younger members to smaller independent movements.

As with secular organizations, religious institutions must adapt to cultural changes to maintain their position in the marketplace. Competing forces, like the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship and the rise of neo-Pentecostalism, the resurgent social activism of the PNBC, the enormous popularity of independent mega-ministries like T. D. Jakes, and changes in contemporary gospel, all serve as persistent reminders that the stakes are too high for the NBC not to embrace the necessary changes to remain relevant in a competitive religious economy.

We have produced evidence throughout this essay that a loose form of organizational structure, driven by charismatic agency, characterizes the NBC. Crucial to this state of affairs has been an office of president characterized by unlimited power that is not sufficiently restricted by effective checks and balances. For a century the NBC had no tenure rule, which allowed the majority of its presidents to remain in office for well over a decade. As a result, the charismatic pastor/president figure has governed the NBC like an imperial lord. Under this arrangement some of the talented and influential leaders have abdicated their responsibilities under the doctrine that good Baptists follow their leader. Despite the advantages of this form of governance, it also contributed to fiscal mismanagement, institutional inertia, and most recently, a crippling scandal.

The leadership we interviewed appears ready to institute firm structure into the NBC, and reduce the unchecked power of the presidency by introducing a rigorous set of checks and balances. Indeed, NBC's new president has declared that "We've got to have structure, we've begun the process of developing and implementing systems for effective financial functioning. . . . As we look at auxiliaries, and departments, commissions and committee, let us not permit attachment to the status quo to hinder the changes needed to make our convention structurally and programmatically one."⁴² Without such structural changes the NBC risks extinction because it will find itself incapable of dealing with the organizational challenges pervasive in the modern world.

As an institution the NBC has not fostered a democratic climate and a high level of democratic participation. In a sense this is a paradox because its autonomy principle has generated a great deal of democracy between congre-

42. Shaw, "A Mirror Moment."

gations, associations, state conventions, and the NBC. Yet because of its loose structure and imperial presidency, a form of tyranny from the top has stifled this democracy. Presidential elections seldom occurred because the president was usually declared the victor following his annual address. Other major leadership positions in the NBC are not subject to a tenure rule. Thus, it is not unusual for these positions to be held by the same individuals for decades. Democratic participation in the NBC is also discouraged by women's lack of access to avenues of power in the convention.

There are signs, however, that increasing democratic winds are beginning to blow in the NBC. A tenure rule pertaining to the presidency was established shortly before the close of the twentieth century. As a result, the last two presidential elections have been conducted in a relatively democratic manner. The last election, following the Lyons scandal, generated a spirited race with the victor winning by a razor-thin margin over two other candidates. Moreover, the election itself was conducted through electronic voting, supervised by impartial professionals. Reflecting on this election, one NBC pastor concluded: "The election itself had never been that democratic in a couple of generations I don't think. . . . It's interesting to see a democratic culture being created among a people and to see the beginning stages of that." Ironically, winds of change have blown in on the wings of a scandal and a newly instituted tenure rule.

The age hierarchy has detrimental effects on the NBC. The absence of young adults and people in early middle age in positions of influence deprives the NBC of important input. Young people have different life experiences and worldviews than older members of the convention. Those views and experiences should be reflected in the life and polity of the NBC. The young people are crucial agents that revitalize and contemporize the music and worship styles of the convention. If their experiences are not reflected in the NBC, young people will pursue religious alternatives where their voices will be heard. Most importantly, the technological revolution has not landed squarely with the NBC. Computers providing access to electronic mail and the Internet are not prevalent in black Baptist settings. The younger generations have grown up in the midst of the electronic superhighway, and many have attained the skills required to navigate within this new frontier. The NBC needs to involve this generation in substantive ways in the life of the convention so that it can fully undergo the technological transformation required of those institutions that will remain relevant in the twenty-first century.

Lyons made an important contribution to the NBC when he embraced the idea to create a Young Pastors and Ministers Department in the convention. Currently that department is thriving because young pastors have acquired

some important space in the public sphere of the NBC. As a pastor related, the Young Pastors Department “provides an opportunity for young pastors to have their own little convention and their own structure.” However, this pastor warned that this department could become diversionary because it leaves intact an age hierarchy structure while soothing the young. It would be in the long-term interest of the NBC to fully embrace its younger members, so as to insure its future.

The Lyons scandal revealed just how inadequate the NBC was in dealing with its environment. Its business practices proved archaic in the context of corporate America. Its practice of allowing the president to operate as its sole proprietor proved naive in a world where corporate management teams and legal experts protect the interests of their firms. The NBC’s view that the church operates as a family also proved naive in an environment where organizations and the state operate according to rational legal bureaucratic principles. Structural changes are needed in the NBC if it is to become an effective actor in its environment. An NBC leader pointed out how the Lyons scandal was revealing in this respect:

I think it alerts the Convention to the fact that in terms of how it does business and how it promotes itself, that it has to be cognizant of the fact that we are in a governmental and political context where we will not escape scrutiny. And where we will be judged by those standards and if we violate them in significant ways, there will be an effort to impose sanction upon us. . . . We’re going to have to re-evaluate how we function in our local communities; how do we relate to politicians, how do we relate to economic entities, and we’re going to have to understand that there’s no blessing without responsibilities, there’s not benefit without obligation, and that it’s not always easy to determine who the other “Gods” are that we’re supposed to have.

A solution to these problems will require that the NBC make some fundamental structural changes, where experts rather than charismatic pastors have the technical responsibilities of steering the NBC through its environment. Indeed, segments of the NBC’s membership are not likely to continue to support the convention if it is rocked by additional scandals. The NBC’s current debt is in part due to the falling off of contributions by the rank and file during the Lyons scandal. In the absence of effective checks and balances, and needed structural changes, NBC members may vote with their feet by exiting in droves. In light of the recent Enron catastrophe, it should be clear that highly placed actors left unchecked may yield to temptation and exploit their office. The point

is that effective structural mechanisms are needed, even in the NBC, because all human beings fall short of God's glory. However, the NBC will need to reconcile and assess its structural requirements and its guiding family metaphor. The church historian we interviewed pointed to this thorny issue: "I think that metaphor then hinders some of the other changes that are being done structurally and organizationally. . . . It's just that with this dominant metaphor, it makes it [structural changes] more difficult."

The family metaphor has real value because it reflects the culture and needs of a community that is not fully embraced by the larger society. Because of the positive contributions the church makes to the well-being of black people, it is unlikely that the family metaphor will lose its resonance any time soon. To be an effective environmental actor, however, the NBC will need to address the tension between its identity as a family and its structural needs, and make the necessary adjustments.

If the NBC is to be respected, supported, and defended by the black community, it must address its political, economic, and social needs more effectively. The convention has no visible and coherent national program to address the poverty experienced by millions of African Americans. Indeed, each year it dumps approximately \$50 million into the economy of the city that hosts its annual meeting. After a century the NBC does not own a hotel chain or other major business that could contribute to the economic uplift of African Americans. Similarly, while the NBC believes in an "intact" two-parent spiritual household, it does not have a national plan to strengthen black families, many of whom are poor because they are supported by the meager incomes of single women. The NBC has no national plan to counteract the burgeoning prison industry, which incarcerates a disproportionate number of African Americans. Because of its loss of respect in the larger society, major politicians have begun to ignore the NBC. Thus, its new president revealed that "Months ago I invited Vice President Gore and Governor Bush to address this body and be heard by us, not in an entrapping way, but in a mutually enlightening way. Neither candidate replied on paper. Neither put us on their schedule."⁴³ He then raised the troubling question: "Have we been written off?"

NBC churches played a critical role in the Civil Rights movement, but without the support of NBC's top leadership. The autonomy principle of the Baptist church enabled thousands of churches and pastors to back King's leadership and follow him into the streets in pursuit of justice and equality. A question now is whether the NBC will engage in creative and innovative social change activities, aimed at generating social equality. If the NBC fails to func-

43. Shaw, "A Mirror Moment."

tion as a social change agent, it may alienate a new generation. A leading pastor of the PNBC put this issue squarely on the table:

There has to come a new generation of Black ministers who will themselves be new creatures. They will attack the system, even the Black church; they will attack the Black church at the core of itself and will force it to raise new questions about itself. . . . They will ask the question why is it that with all of the things that are happening to us, we sing on Sunday . . . but nothing seems to change, in fact things are getting worse for us? So that generation will ask that question and they will do it with anger, disappointment and disillusionment with the Black church.

To be salient in the black community the NBC will have to return to its roots, where injustice and inequality were dissected and confronted. But even here, the NBC has historically allowed itself to be trapped between an activist stance and an otherworldly orientation that focuses disproportionately on spiritual matters. Contemporary challenges demand that the NBC creatively embrace church activism and spiritual matters, so that the vast needs of black people can be addressed.

Eventually the NBC will have to face the widespread gender inequality institutionalized throughout the convention. Deep rumbles over gender inequality are apparent to those who listen. The lid over this issue will not remain intact for an eternity. Eventually the NBC will have to answer for its unwillingness to step up to the moral plate and empower women. It is true that similar levels of gender inequality exist within the Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Convention, and several other denominations. However, the NBC has a different calling because it was born out of the need to address the unique problems of a people shackled by the chains of oppression. There were Scriptures in the same Bible Baptists use today that condoned oppression, but the NBC critiqued them and struck out on the journey to uplift and free black people. It is curious indeed that the majority of black male pastors not only refuse to embrace the need to empower women, but stand directly in the path to such empowerment. As a result, the perspectives of women are not heard from the pulpit. There are over fifty thousand pastoral and ministerial positions in the black Baptist church, but women do not have access to them because of gender discrimination in the church and the NBC.

In a classic study of NBC's Woman's Auxiliary, Higginbotham documented the central role that women have played in the NBC historically.⁴⁴ Her central argument maintains that women in the auxiliary were often leaders who

44. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*.

pursued their own goals, while fighting racism and sexism simultaneously. While this argument captures important contributions made by NBC women, it fails to reveal the extent to which the Woman's Auxiliary has supported male patriarchy in the NBC proper. Thus, constitutionally the "Woman's Auxiliary operates under the auspices of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. The primary objective of the Auxiliary is to support and supplement the goals and objectives of the Convention."⁴⁵ This body, therefore, is not to lead, but to "support and supplement." The current president of the Woman's Auxiliary confirmed that the group was not to lead when she stated that the men "are our pastors. . . . They are our leaders."⁴⁶

The future of NBC's gender inequality is uncertain. There are small minorities of highly visible male pastors who ordain and support women pastors. They constitute important role models of change for those pastors sitting on the fence and for young pastors. However, like "enlightened" slave masters, these role models are reluctant to advocate that their colleagues pick up the cross of women's empowerment. In all likelihood, women will have to revolt in order to change the gender inequality in the NBC and the black Baptist church. Thus, the president of a black seminary argued that "unless there is statistically significant unrest, there is unfortunately no intrinsic engine driving male ministers who are in power to begin to change that model [male domination]." However, because of their numerical superiority, women are in a position to force change. As the female pastor, attorney, and national civil rights leader we interviewed put it, "I mean we could shut down the church on any given Sunday with just a simple 'we're not going, y'all run it without us.'" It would be in the long-term interests of the NBC to empower women rather than be confronted with a revolution later. Without such empowerment, that revolution will come as surely as did those that overthrew slavery and Jim Crow.

The NBC remains the largest black religious organization in the world. It has a long and important history in the black community, the nation, and other parts of the world. It is now challenged to make the necessary change that will enable it to be an important force in the world. Its long history attests to the fact that it has been a survivor. The question now is whether it will have the courage and foresight to implement positive changes. As the NBC's former general secretary put it: "The National Baptist Convention wants to live and so therefore it will do what it has to do in order to maintain life. That means it will have to come to grips with the government, with the cultural ethos, with its own con-

45. 1998 *Annual Report*, p. 142.

46. Waveney Ann Moore and Twila Decker, "Women's Role in Male-Led Church," *St. Petersburg Times Online*, September 9, 1999.

stituency and other constituencies . . . and if it doesn't it will die." While rumors of NBC's death are greatly exaggerated, to remain relevant and vital the convention must refashion itself in a manner that will enable it to promote the broad interests of the African American community.