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## **Leisure in the Life of the 21st Century Black Church: Re-Thinking the Gift**

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### **Abstract**

Scholarship devoted to examining the role that leisure plays in the life of the Black Church is lacking. Leisure is an important facet of congregational life in African American churches and permeates congregational dynamics on multiple levels. The purpose of this essay is to examine leisure in the life of the Black Church and posit how a healthy, theologically accurate understanding of the value of leisure can help with health and wellness promotion, community-economic development and church growth. The Black Church is defined as the eight historically Black denominations: African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Christian Methodist Episcopal, Church of God in Christ, National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., National Baptist Convention of America, National Missionary Baptist Convention, and Progressive National Baptist Convention. How the Black Church defines leisure philosophically and theologically continues to evolve. The focal points of discussion in this paper include: (1) the tension between religious tradition, leisure and the Black Church; (2) the value of leisure to the 21<sup>st</sup> century Black Church; (3) leisure as a catalyst for promoting physical activity in Black churches; and (4) social leisure as an important facet of congregational life and church growth. among African American churches. This essay also provides examples of how progressive Black churches across the United States have utilized leisure to develop health promotion programs, and to spur church growth. Finally, this paper calls for additional research specific to leisure and the Black Church along with the espousal of a meaningful theology of leisure by Black churches.

There is a well documented history of predominately black churches utilizing leisure and recreation to create a sense of solidarity and community among African Americans (Mamiya 1990; Pinn, 2008). During tumultuous periods in U.S. history, the Black Church served as a safe haven for African Americans, creating opportunities for fun and fellowship despite the seriousness of the times. The constructive use of leisure became a mechanism for individual, familial and corporate resilience.

Historically, African American churches have played a major role in shaping leisure attitudes and behaviors (Holland, 2002). Misguided doctrinal statements and religious tradition sometimes fueled the negative stigma attached to leisure. There are recorded instances in African American church history where specific leisure activities have been labeled as being “of the devil” or “ungodly” (Pinn, 2008; Sanders, 1996). The scholarly literature in recreation and leisure studies, religion or sociology does not chronicle the conceptual framework from which African Americans conceptualized or operationalized the term leisure. Over the span of time, these definitional and theological unclaritys, created tension between the virtuous and that which is perceived to be vice-laden. Individual and corporate constraints to leisure became prevalent, particularly in the older predominately black denominations and their member churches (Waller, 2009).

The purpose of this essay is three-fold. First, to highlight the role and importance of leisure in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Black Church. Second, to illustrate how the constructive use of leisure by African American churches can help to combat health disparities among African Americans through participation in physical activity. Finally, this essay examines the role leisure plays in spurring church growth. This essay is important because it contributes to the growing corpus of literature in the sub-discipline of religion and leisure, within the discipline of recreation and leisure studies. Additionally, to date there is very little literature that examines religion and leisure through the contextual experience of African Americans.

### **Defining the Black Church**

In contemporary times, the term Black Church or African-American Church refers to Christian churches that minister to predominantly African-American congregations in the United States. The term encompasses the eight historically Black denominations: African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Christian Methodist Episcopal, Church of God in Christ, National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., National Baptist Convention of America, National Missionary Baptist Convention, and Progressive National Baptist Convention. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, predominately African American congregations affiliated the United Church of Christ and Roman Catholicism are also included in the scope of the Black Church. Taken together, these denominations form what Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) called the “Black Church” and encompass more than 66,000 churches across the United States (Linder, 2008).

The African American church was not only spiritually important, but also culturally unifying. It is the heart of the African American community. Author Evelyn Higginbotham in her essay *The Black Church: A Gender Perspective* stated, “the public discourse of church leaders and members, both male and female, had historically linked social regeneration, in the specific form of racial advancement, to spiritual regeneration” (p. 345). The church fought against the social injustices that African Americans faced in America. It was also a sanctuary of comfort, where everyone could express themselves freely and unite culturally in their beliefs and life practices. Morris (1984) further stated, “The church was a place to observe, participate in, and experience the reality of owning and directing an institution free from the control of whites. The church was also an arena where group interests could be articulated and defended collectively. For all these reasons and a host of others, “the Black Church has served as the organizational hub of black life” (p. 5). The church is influential for not only physically unifying its congregation, but emotionally and spiritually tying everyone together.

The Black Church remains one of the strong voices of morality, social justice, and hope in the United States. Through the conveyance of moral teachings, doctrine, history, and tradition the Black Church continues to be the epicenter for spurring moral, social, political, and economic self-help among its congregants and within Black communities. Thompson and McRae (2001) argued that because African American churches are heavily grounded in religious tradition they provide a forum to reinforce values, norms, and behaviors conducive to creating a sense of “relatedness” and community. Ellison (1993) also contended that the Black Church offers an

interpersonal context where individuals are evaluated and respected by others in terms of their social performances (e.g., congruency between what is believed and the lived experience) and spiritual capital (e.g., morality, wisdom, insight). Subsequently, a stringent moral code emerged within many African American churches. This code heavily influenced the leisure behaviors and choices of African American congregants and greatly restricted the leisure activities of congregations (Holland, 2002). While history may point to the contributions of local African American churches in shaping the moral behavior of its members, the positive and negative values assigned to leisure by the Black Church remain an important facet of the conversation.

### **Perspectives About Leisure in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Black Church**

Leisure has a rich history in the life of the Black Church. From the founding of the first African American congregation in the late 1780's, leisure has been one of the focal points of congregational life. In *Black Church Studies: An Introduction*, S. Floyd-Thomas, J. Floyd-Thomas, Duncan, Ray, Jr. and Westfield (2007) argued that the social dimensions of the church [including leisure] were and remain vital to the African American religious and cultural experience. Within the context of leisure individual and communal worship occurred (Raboteau, 1995); respites from the toils of work were obtained (Martin, 2000); native African culture was conveyed and maintained (Holland, 2002); and a forum for creating and solidifying a sense of community was developed (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Many social groups or auxiliaries, arts, cultural and fellowship activities that contemporary churches include in their ministry schemes date back to the formative years of the Black Church.

As the Black Church continued to evolve, it became more definitive about spiritually and socially acceptable forms of leisure. Consequently, congregants were encouraged to avoid participation in morally questionable leisure pursuits. This demarcation between acceptable and unacceptable leisure activities began to appear in the social ethos and doctrinal statements of churches aligned with Protestant denominations. For example, in their analysis of the moral fabric of the Black Church, Paris (1985) and Taylor (1994) noted that many Black churches across denominations expressly prohibited "pleasure-filled" leisure activities on Sunday, gambling, drinking, smoking, dancing, card-playing, listening to secular music and sexual promiscuity. Those leisure activities that gave the appearance of conflicting with scripture, the moral code of the church or served to perpetuate stereotypical behaviors of African Americans were frowned upon. Subsequently, the Black Church's influence on shaping leisure attitudes escalated among African American Christians (Holland, 2002).

### **The Basis for Negative Views of Leisure**

So, what contributed to the "negativity" associated with leisure in the experience of the Black Church? In part, the negative views of leisure can be attributed to: 1) the misinterpretation of scripture (Beale, 1994); 2) social control exerted by the church (Holland, 2002); 3) perpetuation of religious tradition within local churches; 4) the disdain for hedonism (Hart, 2007); and 5) secularization (Sanders, 1996). Additionally, the tenacity with which the Black

Church grasped its role as the “moral guardian” of the African American community contributed to the problem. Taylor (1994), in elucidating on this role noted that, “black churches took any deviation [from guidelines for moral conduct] as illegitimate and, therefore, intolerable; insisting on proper behavior and correct leisure activities from the masses” (p.33). Understanding the genesis of the negative view of leisure provides a point of reference to begin de-constructing how the negative associations of leisure began in the Black Church.

Compounding the “negativity” problem is the noticeable absence of teachings about the positive aspects of leisure in Christian education materials. Sermons preached by African American clergy seldom proclaim the positive aspects of leisure. Frazier and Lincoln (1974) summarized the phenomenon best when they stated that, “the Negro [Black] Church became “secularized and lost its other-worldly outlook, focusing on the Negro [African American] condition in the world” (p. 56). Moreover, Frazier and Lincoln (1974) concluded, “the most obvious evidence of secularization has been that churches have been forced to tolerate card playing and dancing and theater going” (p.56). The opposition to “secularized” forms of recreation [leisure] was rationalized on the basis that they would lead to sinful behaviors. Subsequently, when there is proclamation about leisure, in many cases it is in the form of a negative admonishment.

Recently, I visited an African American, Protestant church where the minister preached a sermon entitled “Between a Rock and Hard Place” using Exodus 33:12-23 as the pericope. As her sermonic interludes began to unfold, she noted that people literally find themselves between the proverbial “rock and the hard place” because of their sins. The proclaimer used the conduct of the children of Israel as they celebrated making the golden calf in their leisure as noted in Exodus 32:1-6 to buttress the point. Interestingly enough, the preacher’s primary point in this sermonic move was that when we are not busy worshiping, praising and doing God’s work, our minds and hands lead us into idolatrous behaviors in our leisure and furthermore we *play* at our obedience and dedication to God. I could not help but think of the negative message about play and leisure that was conveyed to 600 or more congregants.

Despite the exegetical and homiletical miscues, her comments reinforced the common negative associations assigned to leisure within the Black Church. Perhaps what is more unfortunate as a result of this toxic homily is the near “idolizing” of work and the negative relegation of leisure. Volf (1991) in *Work in the Spirit* suggested in an instance such as this, congregants embrace the work values of their ancestors and the Church, but have not replaced work values with leisure values. The paradox is that it is the over-emphasis on secular work and working in the church that in part is driving the exodus from mainstream Protestant denominations (Linder, 2008; Thumma & Davis, 2007).

### **Changing Attitudes Toward Leisure**

Toward the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, enlightened black clergy (particularly those that are seminary trained) and laity began advocating for a more balanced and theologically accurate view of leisure. Leisure is not construed as the anti-thesis of work, but viewed as complimentary,

and necessary for a balanced, godly-life. The constructive use of leisure is essential to creating healthy people, communities and churches. Predominately black churches across dominations are beginning to understand the value of fun and fellowship that can occur within the context of leisure. The more progressive churches are integrating a *leisure ethic* and *theology of leisure* into their implicit (theologies that inform congregational life) and explicit (doctrine, confessions, creeds) theologies (Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley, & McKinney, 1998). This shift in thinking may be attributed to a heightened and renewed understanding of the Fourth Commandment (Ex 20:8-11) and its implications for leisure. Additionally, Black clergy are becoming more aware of the need to promote the constructive use of leisure as a respite from the rigors of daily living and serving in the church. Finally, while the history of the Black Church has revealed how the restrictive aspects of doctrine and religious tradition have constrained leisure for some, an “evolved” understanding of the “gift” of leisure has enabled enlightened black Christians and the Black Church to see leisure in a positive “holistic” sense.

### **Leisure as a “Gift”**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one of the hallmarks of a spiritually healthy, vibrant congregation that is primed for growth is its ability to have fun and engage in spirit-filled fellowship. This shift represents the balance between the work of kingdom building and embracing the “gift” of leisure. James 1:7 (NIV) reminds us that “every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights ...” Leisure is one of the “good and perfect gifts” that God provides. Christian author J.I. Packer (2001) speaking of the “gift of leisure” stated,

All leisure, including semi-leisure, is a gift from God that, when used wisely, provides rest, relaxation, enjoyment, and physical, psychic health. It allows people to rediscover there distinctly human values, to build relationships, strengthen family ties and put themselves in touch with nature (p. 83).

In the life of the Black Church, leisure provides opportunities for spiritual and physical renewal (Mk 6:31); fellowship (Ps 133:1); and in some cases reconciliation of individuals to God and each other (2 Cor 5:18). Increasingly, African American clergy are acknowledging that leisure teaches the value of rest (Gen 2:2-3); godly pleasure and enjoyment (Eccl 8:15); and the beauty of the wise stewardship of leisure (Phil 4:18). As a result of the transformed conception of leisure, the Black Church is positioned to see the redemptive and transformative aspects of leisure, especially in the areas of promoting a health and wellness agenda and spurring church growth.

### **Leisure and Health/Wellness Promotion in the Black Church**

In the life of the individual and the church, physical activity during leisure can save lives and enhance the quality of life. For African Americans this fact is crucial. According to the Office of Minority Health (OMH), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the mortality rate for African Americans is higher than Whites for heart diseases, stroke, and diabetes (Office of Minority Health, 2009). Each of the previously mentioned maladies can be

tied back to physical inactivity. Furthermore, OMH (2009) paints a grimmer picture of health challenges to African Americans with the following facts:

- African American women have the highest rates of being overweight or obese compared to other groups in the U.S. About four out of five African American women are overweight or obese.
- In 2007, African Americans were 1.4 times as likely to be obese as Non-Hispanic Whites.
- From 2003-2006, African American women were 70% more likely to be obese than Non-Hispanic White women.
- In 2003-2004, African American children between ages 6 -17 were 1.3 times as likely to be overweight than Non-Hispanic Whites.
- In 2006, African Americans were 60% less likely to engage in active physical activity as Non-Hispanic Whites.
- Deaths from heart disease and stroke are almost twice the rate for African Americans as compared to Whites.

When the prevalence of obesity in the African American community is factored into the health equation, the data create a greater level of concern (Bopp et al., 2007). The Black Church is faced with the challenge of getting people physically active through the appropriate use of leisure and leisure time. Many African American churches have come to the realization that the church is a prime mechanism for getting people to embrace healthy lifestyles and wellness as a part of their overall personal stewardship (Young & Stewart, 2006). In part, this task may be accomplished by a more inclusive theology of stewardship. It is commonplace for African American church-goers to frame stewardship through the lens of their time, talent and tithes (Luke 12:41-48; 1 Timothy 4:11-16; Timothy 4:1-2). It is not uncommon for black churches to dedicate special teachings and even months of the year to the matter of personal and corporate stewardship of one's time, talent and tithes. Over the last decade an increasing number of black churches have begun to address the issue of health and wellness as a part of personal stewardship. From the pulpit and through Christian Education efforts, greater emphasis is being placed on health and wellness through *body stewardship*—the biblical mandate to take care of the temple where the Spirit of God dwells (1 Cor 6:19). Unfortunately, this passage of scripture is often misinterpreted to promote the avoidance of behaviors such as alcohol consumption, using tobacco products, using illegal drugs, and engaging in pre- and extramarital sex rather than preventive health behaviors such as proper nutrition, diet and exercise.

As opposed to embracing a theology that celebrates gaining material wealth through wise stewardship and God's blessings, churches and parishioners, on an individual and congregational level, celebrate a new found *theology of health and wellness*. For example, Holt and McClure (2006) conducted a qualitative study that examined perceptions of the religiosity-health connection among African American church members. The authors conducted 33 interviews with members of predominately African American churches. To ensure that the views elicited during the interviews represented a range of churchgoing African Americans, the researchers attempted to sample churches that represented different denominations, with additional representation of

the two predominant membership groups (Baptist and Roman Catholic) in the study region. Participating churches included two Baptist, two Catholic, one African Methodist Episcopal, one Christian Methodist Episcopal, and one Church of God in Christ. The clergy and members from each congregation completed semi-structured interviews. Participants described the religiosity-health connection in their own words and talked about whether and how their religious beliefs and practices affect their health. The authors derived an open coding scheme from the data using an inductive process. Major themes that emerged included spiritual health, mental health's effects on physical health, stress reduction by giving problems to God, and the body as a temple of God. These religion-health themes buttress the importance of church-based health promotion in the African American community (pp. 279-281).

With the renewed emphasis on taking care of the body through physical activity (PA) many churches across the nation have developed wellness and fitness programming as part of their overarching ministries. Nutrition, diet and exercise programs are the lynchpins of health and wellness ministries. Additionally, several predominately African American mega-churches across denominations have constructed fitness and wellness centers to spur PA within the congregation and community. For example *Samson's Health and Fitness Center*, located in Lithonia, GA, is owned and operated by the 30,000 member New Birth Missionary Baptist Church. This state of the art facility provides a milieu of services ranging from aerobics to strength and conditioning to nutrition counseling for its members and the surrounding community (see <http://www.newbirth.org/samsons/>).

Faith-based interventions hold promise for increasing physical activity (PA) and thereby reducing health disparities. A recent study by Bopp et al. (2007) examined the perceived influences on PA participation, the link between spirituality and health behaviors and the role of the church in promoting PA among African Americans. Participants were adult members of African American churches in South Carolina. In preparation for a faith-based intervention, eight focus groups were conducted with sedentary or underactive participants. Groups were stratified by age, geography and gender. Four general categories were determined from the focus groups: spirituality, barriers, enablers and desired PA programs. Personal, social, community and environmental barriers and enablers were described by both men and women, with no apparent differences by age. Additionally, both men and women mentioned aerobics, walking programs, sports and classes specifically for older adults as PA programs they would like available at church. This study provided useful information for understanding the attitudes and experiences with exercise among African Americans, and provides a foundation for promoting PA through interventions with this population by incorporating spirituality, culturally specific activities and social support within the church.

An illustration of how an African American church embodies its theology lies in the example of Gospel Water Branch Baptist Church located near Augusta, GA. Utilizing the services of trained lay leaders researchers were able to collect full data on 35 (nearly 88 percent) of the 40 obese men and women who completed the initial 12 weekly sessions of the *Fit Body and Soul* (FBS) program. The participants were average age 46 and had an average body mass



index (BMI) of 36. After 12 weeks, almost 46 percent (16/35) of participants lost five percent or more of their starting weight. About 26 percent (nine) lost seven percent or more. The program included six monthly “booster” sessions for six months after the 12 weekly behavioral health intervention sessions. At the study’s end, 11 of the 16 subjects (nearly 69 percent) with initial weight-loss success had kept the weight off through the entire nine months (American Heart Association, 2009).

Overall, understanding of the role of physical activity within the context of leisure is important to the promotion of health and wellness ministry efforts within African American churches. In order to sustain continued progress toward correcting health disparities that plague African Americans the dialogue regarding personal stewardship must include the urgency of being a wise steward of the body. As a part of Black Theology, there must be a balanced espousal of truth regarding God’s desire for material wealth (Phillipians 4:19) and the Divine’s desire for health and wellness for the believer (3 John 1:2).

### **Leisure as an Element of Church Growth**

Black churches experience numerical and spiritual growth for a multiplicity of reasons. Thumma (2007) and Floyd et al. (2007) argued that factors such as a charismatic pastor, geographic location, history, perceived popularity or status assigned to congregational membership, multi-faceted, sustainable ministries and social justice/political engagement contribute to their growth. Perhaps more important is the fact that people are seeking and finding churches where they can encounter God within the context of their lived experience, and where they can live peacefully in community with like-minded believers. The provision of social leisure and fellowship opportunities are important facets of living in community. Floyd-Thomas et al. (2007) in their analysis of black mega-churches noted that larger churches, with a more progressive theology, provide a wide range of social, recreational, and “aid-ministries” in support of their congregation. Additionally, Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) and Percy (2003) suggested that facilities (sanctuary and recreational), programs and relevancy of the church in the neighborhood or community they are located in contribute to church growth. These intentional efforts are undertaken with the goal of enhancing the community (within and outside of the walls of the church).

The 2001 U.S. Congregations Study also undergirds the importance of provision of leisure services as an element of church growth among African American congregations. This study examined the important facets of congregational life in more than 2,000 churches (300,000 members), across denominations, in the United States. Two significant findings pertained to historically Black congregations: (1) 2.9% of the respondents classified their congregation as “strict,” meaning there were prohibitions against gambling; alcohol; smoking; dancing; foods; and dress; (2) 6.9% of congregations reported they were involved in implementing community services that included social/recreational activities, health programs, youth programs, arts/music, senior programs, sports, hobbies and crafts (U.S. Congregational Survey, 2001).

Churches are social institutions and part of the motivation for attending is to socially engage like-minded believers. Garner (2003), framing the importance of recreation and sport ministry, within the context of leisure and the church suggested that: (1) sport and recreation as leisure outlets provide gathering places for people; (2) build fellowship opportunities; and (3) bolster evangelism and outreach efforts (p. 12-13). Drake and Clayton (1970) suggested that leisure provided by black churches “helped otherwise anonymous people ease the burden of class differentiation and *anomie*, within and outside of the black churches” (p. 147). Over the last century this aim has been accomplished through social leisure, in mass and small groups. Relatedly, in a study of African American churches, Taylor (1992) found that churches played an important role in providing leisure services for their congregants and communities. African American churches formed church clubs and auxiliaries and with their involvement in dances, bazaars, and fashion shows blended the secular with the sacred. Taylor proposed that these churches were responding to a changing African American community that invested heavily in modern leisure activities.

Youth, adults, seniors and families continue to be the focal point of congregational growth. Norden (1965), speaking prophetically about leisure, the church, and the Christian family stated, “leisure provides many opportunities for the Christian family to be the community of Jesus Christ in the sanctuary of the home and church” (p. 71). Many black churches are feeling the impact of the lifestyles of “Gen X’ers” or “Millennials” – people now in their 20’s and 30’s who attend and support local congregations but resist becoming members. Part of the attracting and retaining Gen X’ers is the development of facilities and ministries that can accommodate Christian Education, and evangelistic efforts that include fitness, wellness, recreation and sport ministries. The Church must be relevant, reflexive and responsive in order for Gen Xers “to believe and belong” (Gibbs & Bolger, 2005, p. 77).

The social leisure component of the contemporary Black Church is critical to capturing and retaining the membership of the 35-50 age cohorts. Thumma and Travis (2007) in their study of ministry initiatives conducted by mega-churches noted that 51% of the churches studied reported that fellowships, clubs, and social activities were considered as key activities in the success and growth of the church (pp. 102-103). The researchers in the same study reported that 30% of congregants across target churches indicated they were active with their church at least once per quarter for fellowship opportunities or for participation in leisure related clubs (p. 107). These two key findings buttress the importance of leisure in the life of the church.

Leisure activities play a major role in providing opportunities for senior citizens to engage in meaningful fellowship in black churches. Paris (1985) argued that the Black Church has a “moral duty” to teach the young and take care of the elders (p. 57). Research conducted by Blackman (1996) and Melson (1995) confirmed the importance of the church as a positive and affirming place for elderly African Americans. Blackman (1996) argued that this is especially true in the cases of aging African American women who have a sense of responsibility for others, in church, and during leisure experiences (p. 48). Taking on the role of “church mother” they are often involved in numerous church activities, including choir, Sunday school, study

groups, dialogue groups, suppers, and socials. One of the key results of the study was that social interaction, often experienced at church, was a positive and popular leisure experience for participants.

Finally, Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) in their landmark analysis of black churches noticed that of the “more progressive” black churches provided their congregations with the following types of facilities and programs: fellowship halls, gymnasias, outdoor basketball courts, and conducted social recreation and athletic programs (pp. 147-150). The anecdotal evidence suggests that many churches across the nation have followed suit in the provision of both facilities and programmatic ministries. Full-blown sport and recreation ministries are now blossoming in black churches across the country. For example, Enon Tabernacle Baptist Church located in Philadelphia, PA effectively utilizes contextualized (targeting the cultural interests of African Americans) leisure programming to attract and retain new and existing members (see <http://www.enontab.org/>). Fun, food, and fellowship undergird the mega-church’s Fellowship Ministry. Golf outings sponsored by the community development corporation, church sponsored excursions to New York to see major Broadway productions and Temple Builders (a spiritually based fitness ministry) spur members to engage the church in relevant ways.

A second illustration can be found in Greater Allen A.M.E. Cathedral in New York. The church operates its own sports facility and fitness center, a Family Life Center and supports a broad-based leisure and sports program featuring the following ministry initiatives: seniors, sports association, creative arts and drama, health and fitness. The program is open to the community as well as Allen’s 15,000 members. Both examples illustrate that leisure is an important factor in promoting church growth in black congregations. It is not the primary reason why churches escalate in numbers but it is one explanatory factor. The Black Church has come full-circle in the sense that the gospel draws congregants to God and leisure is used as an effective tool to retain them and help them grow spiritually.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this essay was to: (1) highlight the role and importance of leisure in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Black Church; (2) examine how the constructive use of leisure by black churches can help to combat health disparities among African Americans; and (3) scrutinize the role that leisure plays in the growth of black churches. This paper provided a “snap-shot” of what can be done by the Black Church when leisure is understood as a theological construct and as an important facet of the human experience. The discussions in this essay undergird the importance of the social dimension of leisure in Black Church dynamics. In many instances promoting healthy attitudes about leisure is a moral duty of the church and is tied to spiritually and physically healthy people and vibrant congregations.

Utilizing leisure to promote physical activity among high risk people and congregations is a critical part of the spiritual agenda for black churches. The church must actively push health to be effective and health-oriented. The church must also move away from focusing on the avoidance of risk or “sin” behaviors and move toward placing greater emphasis on positive

health behaviors, such as healthy diet and physical activity. This might have implications for the integration of religious beliefs into church-based health promotion programs. It is possible that church-based programs might be more effective for behavior change with regard to risk than prevention behaviors. Although church-based programs have focused on both risk (Schorling et al., 1997) and prevention behaviors (McNabb, Cook, Quinn, Karrison, & Kerver, 1997), few of these programs integrate religiosity into their program content. It is not known at present if or how the integration of religious beliefs into health promotion programs would affect risk versus prevention behaviors.

One of the research needs relating to the Black Church and leisure is the replication of the seminal study on African American churches conducted by Lincoln and Mamiya (1990). It is not until a systematic study of the state of black churches is done that we will be able to fully understand the impact of the re-assessment of leisure in the life of the Black Church. Additionally, we will only be able to speculate based on the available anecdotal evidence about the provision of facilities and services and community-economic development efforts of the Black Church.

Leisure plays an important role in the growth and stabilization of African American churches. Disciplining and retaining young adults (18-35), couples with young families and mature adults are a major part of the agenda of black churches. As families today, especially African American families, face mounting challenges (DeFrain & Asay, 2007), leisure programming within a congregational context can be a stabilizing force familially and spiritually. With leisure being a valuable tool in the life of the church, perhaps the Black Church is challenged to re-evaluate its over-emphasis on work and embrace a *leisure ethic*. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century as churches struggle to remain relevant and vibrant they must move toward developing a *theology of leisure* for the benefit of the individual and the church (Neville, 2004; Norden, 1965; Volf, 1991). This new found theology must include positioning leisure as a “gift” from God and must be viewed as the anchor of fun and fellowship for the edification of the Body of Christ. Moreover, Norden (1965) further notes:

On the far-right wing of leisure distortion is a nagging moralism stemming largely from the Protestant work ethics and issuing a rigid, dour, exclusive “work and pray” philosophy. It leaves no room for enjoyment of leisure. It seeks to derive it Biblical sanction from select texts commanding labor, but overlooks other texts which bless man’s rest, reflection, and enjoyment of God amid leisure (p. 96)

Dudley (2002) argued that that churches must pursue new “pillars of fire” or directions in ministry that are healthy for congregational growth. In the case of the Black Church the “pillar of fire” represents a theology that embraces and promotes leisure. He further warns that traveling in new directions is not easy for most churches, for “even the children of Israel, who were slaves in Egypt, grumbled at the thought of leaving their well-worn ways (p.109). As scholars, clergy, and laypersons we only see the picture in part as the apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:12 (NIV), “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” In summary, the important question that

the Black Church must answer in the end is whether or not it has been a “wise steward” of the gift of leisure. `

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