Caring for ‘The Least of These’: An Analysis of Social Justice Activism in the Black Church in the Twenty-First Century

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Award of Honors in Culture and Politics, Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, Spring 2019

April 15, 2019
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all of those in my village who supported me throughout this process. Thank you to the Dean’s Office of the School of Foreign Service for providing me with funding to complete this research. I would especially like to thank Dean Anthony Pirrotti and my thesis peers for all the ways they have supported me through this process from reading drafts to answering questions to our weekly class meetings and feedback sessions. I am thankful to my advisor Dr. Terrence Johnson for all his feedback and support. Dr. Johnson proofread many drafts as well as challenged me on ideas and provided suggestions for other sources. I am grateful to Dr. Brad Braxton, Dr. Larry Perry, and Dr. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham for recommending resources that would be helpful. I am grateful to Dr. Brad Braxton, again, and Rev. Brandon Harris, in addition to Dr. Terrence Johnson, for recommending historic black churches that I could research. I would like to offer a special thank you to Rev. Brandon Harris for connecting me with Rev. Dr. Darryl Roberts, the pastor of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. I would like to offer appreciation also to Shiloh Krupar and Kate Chandler for the feedback they offered as well. Next, I want to take time to thank Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. Thank you to Rev. Dr. Roberts and the Deacon Board for giving me permission to complete research at your church. Thank you also to all the members who participated in interviews and those who helped me recruit people to be interviewed. Thank you to my family, friends, and the Queen House for the ways in which you’ve supported me throughout this process and for allowing me to bounce ideas off you. I am also appreciative of Daphne Wright and Adrienne Roland, the two women at the Howard University School of Divinity School Womanist panel who really challenged me on my research. This thesis was a collaborative, yet challenging process and I offer my sincerest appreciation for all those who played a role in it.
Abstract

During slavery, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Church played a significant role in providing African Americans a platform through which they could fight for freedom and civil rights. Additionally, the Black Church served as a significant pillar in the community in that it was a community center, a health clinic, a food bank, and more in a segregated society in which anti-black racism excluded black people from receiving what today people would consider citizenship rights. This role, according to author and professor Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in *Righteous Discontent* transformed the Black Church into a “counter-public.” As a counter-public the Black Church has informed and shaped black politics; the Black Church has historically had the power to change the political direction of the country. It has also provided for the needs of those within the black community. However, in what many initially considered a “post-racial society” there does not appear to be a need for the Black Church to serve as a counter-public and the Black Church fears being too political. Thus, the role of the Black Church comes into question with such articles as Dr. Eddie Glaude Jr.’s article, “The Black Church is Dead.” So, is the Black Church dead? Has the Black Church lost sight of its prophetic call to fight for social justice? In this research, I completed ethnographic research and interviewed members and leaders of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in Washington, DC to gauge their perspectives on social justice, their scriptural understanding of social justice, the social justice work of the church, and the social justice work completed in their personal lives. While some progressive black churches discuss social justice and have ministries catered to social justice causes, there is still room for improvement as it relates to addressing the root causes of injustices. Nevertheless, the Black Church is still alive and is still serving as a counter-public in society today.
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Introduction

The Black Church & Social Justice in the Contemporary Moment

What is the role of the Black Church in society today? This is a question that many seem to be pondering today, and a question that scholars have been exploring for decades. Historically, the Black Church served as a pillar of the community out of necessity as the government in a society dominated by white supremacy and anti-black racism was not providing black people with the services they needed not only to survive but to thrive. Thus, the Black Church led the effort in helping America fulfill its promises to black people as they took matters into their own hands in providing for blacks in their communities and fighting for equality. As racism is less overt in what some have labeled a “post-racial society,” the role of the Black Church in addressing social justice is less visible in many churches and non-existent in others. While the Church has remained consistent, the social changes have forced it to rethink its role in society. While some may say we don’t need the Church, I would counter that the Black Church is significant in society today in providing for spiritual needs, in providing an understanding of social justice, in providing black people with a supportive community that affirms their lives and experiences, and in providing black communities with resources they may be unable to access and afford in other arenas. Additionally, the role of the Black Church in fighting for social justice and activism continues with pastors, such as Rev. Traci Blackmon in Missouri, who have been on the front lines of movements alongside members of Black Lives Matter and other community organizations.

One scholar, Dr. Eddie Glaude Jr. questioned the voracity of the Black Church in society today in his 2010 article “The Black Church is Dead,” in which he discussed the declining
significance of the Black Church as an institution.¹ For him, one reason the Black Church is dead is because it fails to address issues that are relevant to the contemporary moment. So, was he right? Is the Black Church dead? The exodus of black people back to historically black churches and the current presence of black people at historically black churches suggest otherwise. At the beginning of 2018, eight years after Glaude’s article was published, the New York Times wrote an article entitled “A Quiet Exodus: Why Black Worshippers are Leaving White Evangelical Churches.” Whereas there had been a growing number of black people attending multicultural evangelical megachurches, the election of 2016 signaled a shift in trend.² With the election of Trump, a racial divide within churches emerged as many white-led churches struggled to address race and many black members left as a result, returning to black churches like the ones in which they grew up. The assumption within this move was that that the Black Church will be better able to address racial justice and will be better able to understand the struggles of its black members. Nevertheless, one must wonder if this is an assumption based in truth or if it is a myth. The best way to address this assumption is to speak with members of the Black Church to learn the ways in which the Black Church is currently addressing social justice issues.

The Black Church Defined

For this paper, the Black Church will refer to historically African American Christian churches of varying denominations that developed during the eras of slavery and Reconstruction. Although there is no monolithic black church, the term Black Church will be used to refer to black churches as an institution. Black churches vary in theological and political ideologies;

however, there are more similarities than differences among black churches. There is a Black Church culture that develops that has historically included such factors as interpretation and understanding of the scriptures, hymns and spiritual music, the experiences of its practitioners, and a common history of oppression.³ Thus, even black people who no longer attend church or consider themselves people of faith, are familiar with Black Church culture. This Black Church culture has, in many ways, become a part of popular culture, and it also influences politics. As it relates to the Black Church, religion is as much a part of the public sphere as it is a part of the private sphere. Furthermore, it goes beyond a public sphere in that it also serves as a counter-public as I will discuss more in depth below. Hence, the Black Church is a large institution that impacts a plethora of areas of society, but its influence is often underestimated. Within my research, I hope to gain an understanding on the role of the Black Church in the twenty-first century within the context of social justice work.

Research Overview

In conducting this research, I interviewed members and leaders at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church on their views on social justice in the Bible, social justice in their personal lives, and the ways in which Nineteenth Street Baptist Church addresses social justice. While my research centers in this one church, it is a representation of the ways in which many black progressive churches address social justice. Additionally, these interviews are examined alongside the sermons of the pastor Rev. Dr. Darryl L. Roberts. My initial hypothesis is that churches where the pastor speaks about social justice are more likely to do social justice work.

While this proved true of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, it is worth exploring how the church members define social justice and whether the social justice work done in the church is effective.

In my research, as I will discuss more in Chapter 4, I found that most of the members not only believe that Nineteenth Street Baptist Church is doing social justice work but that the church is doing enough social justice work. There was only one member who felt that the church should be doing drastically more. Nevertheless, I critique the ways in which Nineteenth Street Baptist Church addresses social justice while paying close attention to the ways in which it has historically addressed social justice. In this paper, I conclude that while Nineteenth Street Baptist Church is addressing social justice in a variety of ways, there are ways in which their approach to social justice could be improved, and I explain why and how.

It is important that I address the limitations that are present within my research. As I had a certain timeline to complete this research, I could only focus on one church, a Baptist church. The results may have differed if I had been able to interview members at multiple churches as well as multiple denominations. Furthermore, I only interviewed twenty members of the church; however, I believe that these members represent well the various peoples who attend Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. It is also worth noting that as this is an undergraduate thesis, I am unable to address the various topics I will discuss with the depth I would like to and hope to in a later iteration of this paper.

**More Than a Religious Space: The Black Church as a Counter-Public**

As it relates to the public sphere, one key scholar is Jürgen Habermas. For Habermas, the public sphere develops a “collective understanding” and “plays a central role in social
The public sphere is a site of mutual, free communication among individual citizens. Contextually, Habermas is discussing the bourgeoisie in relation to democratic practices and accountability. While the public sphere provides access to all and elevates the voices and views of all in theory, Habermas’ theory is often critiqued for its failure to recognize the power dynamics at play in society and its exclusion of groups such as the proletariat or women. Thus, scholars have expanded the public sphere and adapted it to focus on specific diverse communities as evidenced in scholarly discourse on the Black Church as a public sphere by Dr. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and Dr. Eddie Glaude Jr.

Additionally, scholars have also developed the concept that is the counter-public. In “Seeking the ‘Counter’ in Counterpublics,” Robert Asen discusses the development of the counter-public as a critical response to the public sphere. Robert Asen says of this, “Counter-publics emerge as a kind of public within a public sphere conceived as a multiplicity.” The counter-public differs from the public sphere in its recognition of the power dynamics at play. In the case of the Black Church, there is a recognition of the racial hegemony in society. The counter-public allows for the development of solidarity as well as an affirmation of presence, significance, and value in the broader society. Thus, the Black Church as a counter-public developed a sense of community as evidenced through the development of community

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6 Fraser, “The Theory of the Public Sphere,” 249.
8 Asen, “Seeking the ‘Counter’,” 429.
institutions through the Black Church and affirmed throughout history that black lives matter in a society that would have black people think otherwise.

In serving as a counter-public, the Black Church offers an alternative voice to that of the white-dominated societal public sphere, the voice of marginalized black women and men.\textsuperscript{9} The Black Church as a counter-public provides a platform through which black people can speak against racism and white supremacy and other systems of oppression they may face, such as the sexism faced by many black women within the Black Church, in addition to sharing the liberatory message of the gospel. It is important to note that the role of the Black Church bridges religion and civil society. The Black Church served as a counter-public in slavery, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights Movement in that it was a space to hear the gospel, a meeting and gathering space, and a space to get needed resources such as food and clothing. Nevertheless, the presence of the Black Church in relation to the public sphere is called into question today.

Today, the Black Church as a public sphere seems divided, and that is evident in the various ways in which black churches perceive and practice social justice.\textsuperscript{10} One example of this is the case in which several black pastors were invited to the White House to speak with President Trump. During this visit, one black pastor commented that Donald Trump is “the most pro-black president we’ve had in our lifetime.”\textsuperscript{11} This representation of the Black Church seems very much in line with the traditional white public sphere as opposed to the historically social


change-focused Black Church counter-public sphere. There is, however, a counter-public present that consist of ministers, activists, and scholars. These women and men, including Rev. Dr. Frederick Douglass Haynes III, Bishop Vashti McKenzie, and Bishop Marvin Sapp among others, penned a letter to the pastors who visited the White House encouraging them to lean into the prophetic and speak truth to power, educate themselves on criminal justice reform and its links to racism, and challenge the president on his stances.\(^{12}\) This is just one example of the ways in which the counter-public is still present in society today, one example that affirms that the Black Church is still alive. As it relates to the Black Church and racial justice, the difference between reinforcing the white public sphere and challenging it as a counter-public is oftentimes hermeneutics, which will be discussed in Chapter 2.

**The Black Church, President Obama, and Black Lives Matter**

With the election of President Obama in 2008, many began to believe that the United States had entered a “post-racial society.” President Obama was supported by most black voters, many of them in the Black Church. As it relates to the Black Church, although efforts have been made to suppress the black vote in North Carolina and other states, programs like “Souls to the Polls” continue to mobilize people in the Black Church as they work towards ensuring that congregants are registered and have transportation to their precinct and also provide candidates with a platform to speak to church members.\(^{13}\) This aligns with the role of the Black Church as a counter-public space. What was most significant for some was the white people who voted for

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President Obama, mainly the younger white voters. Additionally, the election of the first black president of the United States symbolized that black people could ascend to the highest office in the United States. Hence, the election of President Obama is oftentimes cited as a sign that race is no longer an issue and racism no longer exist; however, there is little critique as it relates to those who benefitted from the election of President Obama and those who didn’t.

Like the Civil Rights Movement, most middle-class black people benefitted from the election of President Obama. Furthermore, President Obama passed legislation intended to benefit society believing that it would trickle down to the poorest citizens, thus he did very little to address the struggles of black people specifically. His focus appeared to be equality rather than equity as equity recognizes the ways in which circumstances and identities can privilege some over others. Because Obama failed to sign legislation that worked towards equity, the lives and experiences of many black people under President Obama, especially those living in poverty, remained the same as before his election. The Obama Administration did very little as it relates to addressing anti-black racism and poverty in society; however, his administration left many believing that the problem of racism had been solved.

As some began to believe the myth of a “post-racial society,” some black churches began to respond in a way that shifted the focus of racism from the institution to the individual. Thus, some churches addressed injustices by endorsing respectability politics or the belief that black people must prove themselves worthy of the respect of white people. While respectability

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16 Ta-Nehisi Coates, “My President Was Black,” The Atlantic, August 21, 2018, [www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/01/my-president-was-black/508793/](www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/01/my-president-was-black/508793/).
politics was used in previous decades, such as Nannie Helen Burrough’s endorsement of respectability that will be discussed in Chapter 4, it was often partnered with other approaches to social justice. This is not true of respectability politics today. The middle-class and upper-class churches which tend to endorse respectability politics as a response to racism have members that benefit from legislation, such as that passed by President Obama, that is intended to positively impact all citizens. Thus, racism is a problem that can be solved by hard-work and a change in behavior. Some would say that because they made it, others can make it to. They blame those who have less privileges for not making it as they believe that success is a matter of the individual.\(^{17}\) We see this in claims like “black men need to pull up their pants.” It is the belief that if we act a certain way we will be respected, so we just need good mentors, such as the case with President Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper Program.\(^{18}\) It is not a systematic and institutional racism that holds us back, but we hold ourselves back. In contrast, when black churches do speak out in the face of injustices, they are labeled radical and cited as a threat to society, such as the case with President Obama’s pastor, Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright.\(^{19}\) Thus, many black churches fear the backlash of what it could mean for them to be labeled as too political and instead opt for less political options such as programs that reinforce respectability politics.

In addition to its impact on the ideologies of black churches, the belief in a post-racial society impacts the attendance at black churches. Prior to the election of President Trump, there was a growth in the number of black people attending multicultural megachurches. Many attended these multicultural churches because they enjoyed the contemporary worship or liked

\(^{18}\) Butler, \textit{Chokehold}.
\(^{19}\) Warnock, \textit{The Divided Mind}. 
that the services are shorter than those at the Black Church.\textsuperscript{20} During the perceived “post-racial society,” especially under President Obama, many people joined multicultural churches, some claiming that they don’t see color, only children of God or that there is no race in Heaven.\textsuperscript{21} Membership in these churches was sustained until the election of President Trump revealed that many multicultural churches had not done the work of racial reconciliation to address racism within their churches. Some pastors failed to address racism because they did not know how, or they didn’t see it as important. This left many black members of multicultural churches feeling ostracized, and they returned to the black churches with the belief that the black churches would be able to better understand and address racism.\textsuperscript{22} Nevertheless, the belief in a post-racial society impacts the beliefs of those who attend both black churches and multicultural churches. We cannot assume that black churches are better willing or able to address issues of racial justice as they oftentimes aren’t. Small, rural black churches often fail to address social justice issues due to a lack of awareness, a lack of knowledge as to how to best address social justice issues, a fear of being too political, and because it is not a concern for the members. Moreover, the willingness of a black church to address racial justice can also be impacted by denominational liberty or denominational limitations.

Although some black churches fail to address racial justice issues, some black churches see justice, including racial justice, as an important part of sharing the gospel. Not all black churches have lost sight of the call to the prophetic. There have been church members marching alongside protestors in the Black Lives Matter movement, and there have also been black church

\textsuperscript{22} Campbell, “A Quiet Exodus.”
members who have prayed at marches and rallies. Some black churches understand that although they may not be leading the movement, members can partner with the movement for black lives in ways that go beyond praying within the four walls of the church. Furthermore, there are clergy women and men in the Black Church who are activists within the movement themselves. There are also those who are leading dialogues and starting the conversations on race as it relates to the Black Church and the institution of the Church in general. One such person is Rev. Amantha Barbee, former chair of the Charlotte Coalition for Justice, which was started in Charlotte, NC as a response to the Keith Lamont shooting and protests. Another is Rev. Dr. William J. Barber III, also out of North Carolina, who is one of the core leaders and speakers for the New Poor People’s Campaign. Thus, there are people within the Black Church, pastors and laypeople, who are willing to take up the cause of justice and fight for freedom and liberation inside and outside of the pulpit, but it begins with a theological understanding of liberation and a liberation hermeneutic as I will discuss in Chapter 2.

The Scholar’s Background & Positionality

The Black Church is an integral part of my identity and formative experiences. I grew up in the Baptist tradition attending Greater Mount Sinai Baptist Church in Charlotte, NC, a historically black church that was founded in 1933. Not only did I grow up in the Black Church, but I’ve grown to love the Black Church. I’ve become invested in ensuring that the Black Church doesn’t die, as I’ll discuss later in this paper. My experience with the Black Church has continued from my childhood. I am now in the process of obtaining my Baptist ministry license

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with the goal of being ordained, and I will be continuing my studies as a Master of Divinity candidate at Emory University’s Candler School of Theology in the fall. Currently, I am a Culture and Politics major with a focus in Religion and Social Justice pursuing an unofficial minor in African American Studies and a certificate in Religion, Ethics, and World Affairs, and much of my research thus far has centered on race and religion as a result of reflections in my own experiences as a black woman growing up in the Baptist Church.

Nevertheless, the current administration has caused me to reflect on the ways in which various churches have addressed social justice, specifically racial justice. In many ways, the Church as an institution has failed to adequately address racial justice and social justice more broadly; however, the Black Church has a unique role as it relates to addressing racial justice that differs from that of more recently developed nondenominational churches. The Black Church has a history of people and leaders who have addressed racial justice and social justice issues in society from advocating for the abolition of slavery to participating in the Civil Rights Movement to leading the New Poor People’s Campaign. My goal is to analyze more in-depth the work of the Black Church today as it relates to addressing racial justice and social justice. I did this through ethnographic research at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, the oldest black Baptist church in Washington, DC, in which I interviewed church leaders and laypeople. As I completed my interviews and ethnographic research, I was an observer as well as a participant, much like Marla Frederick in *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith.*
Chapter 1

Literature Review Overview

Although there are several books and articles written on the Black Church, I focus on sources that discuss the sociological and historical aspects. Three canonical texts on the Black Church are W.E.B. DuBois’s *The Negro Church*, E. Franklin Frazier’s *The Negro Church in America*, and Carter G. Woodson’s *The History of the Negro Church*. These sources are timeless in the context they provide. In his report, W.E.B. DuBois defines and examines various aspects of the Black Church ranging from its founding and links to slavery to statistics and data on theological education. However, one main concern of his is the role of the Black Church in public life. Similarly, E. Franklin Frazier discusses the development of the Black Church as an institution and its role in public life. Hence, for DuBois and Frazier, the Black Church is intertwined with black public life. Woodson also discusses the social role of the Black Church in his conceptualizing and contextualizing of the history. DuBois, Frazier, and Woodson all characterize the Black Church in ways that seem to overlap as it relates to the social role of the church. These three sources are significant in that they recognize the distinctiveness of the Black Church in public life and the factors that allowed the church to become a public sphere as well as a counter-public. Hence, these books offer the best starting place in understanding the continued social role of the Black Church in society today.

In addition to these sources that develop the history of the Black Church and provide cursory analysis on the role of the Black Church in public life, there are more recent sources that

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also look at the Black Church’s role in electoral politics and the ways in which the Black Church has responded to specific social justice issues such as HIV/AIDS. One such source is *Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform* by Dr. Andrew Billingsley. Dr. Billingsley work differs from the previous mentioned works in that he completes case studies in Birmingham, Alabama, Savannah, Georgia, and Richmond, Virginia to learn more about the community work completed by black churches in those cities. Furthermore, he also differs from previously mentioned sources in that he discusses the topics of black pride, male youth, HIV/AIDS, and sexism in addressing the contemporary Black Church.\(^{28}\) He addresses the need of the Black Church in providing community programming; however, he focuses primarily on the institutional efforts of specific churches.\(^{29}\) Like, Dr. Billingsley, I look at a case study of one church and the ways in which it addresses social justice. Also, like Dr. Billingsley, I focus on sexism, but I also focus on racism and classism. Additionally, I broaden my research to not only focus on what the church as an institution is doing but also on the social justice and community work completed by the congregants themselves, and I also work to gain an understanding of the motivation behind the social justice work that they do.

Anthony Pinn addresses similar topics in his books *Understanding and Transforming the Black Church* and *What Has the Black Church to Do with Public Life*. In *Understanding and Transforming the Black Church*, he discusses the factors that make up the Black Church and issues that plague the black church, such as gender discrimination, a primary research topic in more recent scholarship.\(^{30}\) In discussing new possibilities in his discussion of the role of the Black Church in politics as it relates to the election of President Obama, he hints at the role of

\(^{28}\) Andrew Billingsley, *Mighty Like a River the Black Church and Social Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

\(^{29}\) Billingsley, *Might Like a River*.

\(^{30}\) Anthony B. Pinn, *Understanding and Transforming the Black Church* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 95.
the Black Church in society today. He sees the role as one related to black liberation theology and the social gospel through the persona of President Barack Obama, but ultimately as a church committed to religious pluralism. Nevertheless, his book ends with the pinnacle that is the election of President Obama. This election was viewed as a symbol of black progress and the coming of a “post-racial society” as discussed previously; however, in many ways, the election of Donald Trump saw a reversion in racial politics. Hence, there must be continued analysis given the changing political context. In some ways, the role of the Black Church as a counter-public is more significant now in the space it provides for black people as evidenced by the exodus of black people from multicultural churches back to black churches. In _What Has the Black Church to Do with Public Life_, Pinn uses the Black Church “as a case study for exploring the role in public life of theism in more general terms.” He concludes that the Black Church should have minimal involvement in public life and politics; however, my research challenges that notion and works to define the role of the Black Church in public life and politics as it relates to social justice.

Moreover, there are sources that are more specific in their demographic and denominational focus. _Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920_ by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham addresses the role of black women in the Black Church, including Nannie Helen Burroughs of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. Hence, her book focuses specifically on church activism as it relates to black women during a specific period in history, 1880-1920. While sexism is one aspect of my research, I focus on other social

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31 Pinn, _Understanding and Transforming the Black Church_, 129.
32 Robertson, “A Quiet Exodus.”
justice issues as well. My overall research and analysis will focus on the Black Church in general; however, it will give attention to the role of gender and the research completed by Dr. Higginbotham. Additionally, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* by James T. Campbell focuses specifically on the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church; however, it does address the development of the AME institution as a reaction to racism.\(^{35}\) Rather than focus on the AME Church specifically, my ethnographic research will be conducted at a black Baptist Church. Thus, it differs from the work of Campbell in that way.

In addition to these scholars, Sandra Barnes has also written on the Black Church but from a sociological perspective. Her research is more contemporary, and it also includes data we haven’t seen since DuBois’ study. In one study, she analyzes the link between black churches that address social justice and their views on women in ministry and finds that even progressive black churches have a long way to go as it relates to affirming women in ministry.\(^{36}\) Hence, like Higginbotham, she looks at gender but based on recent data. In my examination of gender, I began with history, like Higginbotham, and synthesize my contemporary observations of women at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church with the ways in which women are discussed in the interviews I conducted. Another article that is relevant to my research is “Black Church Culture and Community Action.” In this article Barnes looks specifically at cultural aspects, such as sermons, songs, and prayers, and the ways they influence social action in the Black Church. Her data is based on surveys of clergy and church leaders. She finds that certain cultural aspects, such

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as gospel music have a higher correlation to social action.\textsuperscript{37} In my research, I look at the cultural aspect of the sermon and its relation to social justice work in the Black Church. As I only focus on one church, I am unable to determine if the sermons motivate the social justice work of the church or if they reflect the values of the church. Nevertheless, I do observe that there is a culture of social justice present throughout in the lives, sermons, and even casual conversations at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. I also go beyond the work of Barnes in including the voices of laypeople in addition to the voices of leaders within the church. Thus, there are many ways in which my research builds on that of Dr. Sandra Barnes.

The final source I will mention in relation to this research is Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith. Fredrick completes an ethnographic study on the roles of black women in the Black Church. Specifically, she interviews eight black Baptist women in North Carolina on their views on spirituality and how that spirituality plays out in other aspects of their life as well as in their community and those they serve.\textsuperscript{38} Like Frederick, I hope to interview individual Baptist church members within my research; yet, I hope to include people from various class, gender, and age demographics. In this way, I build upon the research of Marla Frederick, yet I am conscious of gender dynamics and discuss the role of women in Nineteenth Street Baptist Church.

My research differs from much of the sources mentioned in my research methodology, my inclusion of the voices and views of diverse demographics of lay people in addition to church leaders, and in the political context in which my research is conducted. While I look at the role of the Black Church in public life like many of the sources, my research is unique in my completion

\textsuperscript{38} Marla Faye Frederick, Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
of ethnographic research, interviews, and sermon analysis. In this regard, my research is most like that of Sandra Barnes and Marla Frederick. While Sandra Barnes examines the impact of sermons as it relates to community work, the data she uses is reported by clergy and church leaders. The primary way my research differs from hers is in my inclusion on lay people. In interviewing black women, Marla Frederick brings in the voices of lay people, and I work to expand these voices beyond black women. Ultimately, I work to understand the role of the Black Church and black church members in public life, especially as a counter-public, as all the sources mentioned strive to do. Additionally, I am conducting this research in a specific political context; this research is being conducted during the Trump Presidency, one in which we have seen some black people shift back to the Black Church from multicultural church. This political context is significant in that the United States is constantly facing racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia, and xenophobia. It is up to the Black Church to determine if it will respond and how it will respond and to know that a response could be the difference between life and death for the Black Church.

Contextualizing the Black Church

The historic Black Church begins with what some have termed the “invisible institution” as the Black Church was a religious institution kept underground by slavery. During slavery, black people had to worship in secret or risk being discovered and prohibited from worshiping collectively by their masters. Enslaved persons could not gather or worship together as slave masters feared revolt. This fear was not unfounded as evidenced by Nat Turner’s spiritually-motivated revolt. In many ways, the Black Church, then “the invisible institution,” developed as

a response to anti-black racism. Although black enslaved persons, and later free persons, adapted Christianity, they adapted it in a way that considered their need for liberation and freedom. Their Christianity was distinct from that of the Christianity practiced by the slaveowners. They rejected scriptures that sanctioned slavery and sought scriptures such as the depiction of the Exodus story and characters like Hagar who, like them, were fleeing oppression. Dr. Warnock calls this “a biblical hermeneutics of freedom.” In this regard, the Black Church served as a counter-public in that it allowed enslaved persons to define Christianity for themselves. Like the Israelites, Christianity offered black slaves the prospect of hope in the form of freedom from bondage. While they may be bound and enslaved on earth, they would find freedom in the next life.

During Reconstruction, the next significant stage in the development of the Black Church as an agent of social change, the Black Church went from being an “invisible institution” to being recognized through the construction of black churches as well as the creation of black denominations, such as the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denomination developed by Richard Allen. Furthermore, during Reconstruction, the Black Church was not only a place of worship but also an institution where black people could go to find aid and resources ranging from funds for burial to education. Moreover, many Black Church leaders served as political representatives for the community; the Black Church served a significant role in social, political, and economic institutions in addition to the religious institution. Hence, it was during this time that the development of the Black Church as a counter-public also became visible through the institutions that developed. Even in the North, following the Great Migration, storefront churches developed as a means of providing community and resources for black people. Above all,

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40 Warnock, *The Divided Mind*.
42 Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*. 
however, the Black Church served as “a refuge in a hostile white world." In the face of anti-black racism, the Black Church provided resources that empowered black people and equipped them to live in a largely white society.

The Black Church also played a notable role in the Civil Rights Movement, although it did not begin the Civil Rights Movement. There were organizers and activists doing racial justice work on the ground prior to the arrival and involvement of religious figures like Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Nevertheless, black churches were viewed as potential agents of mobilization and much of the black leadership in the community was founded in the churches. The Black Church continued to serve as a counter-public in this regard. In addition to its role in organizing, the Black Church also played a role in the development of nonviolent philosophy. Scholar and activist L. H. Whelchel, Jr. in The History and Heritage of African-American Churches: A Way Out of No Way argues that the nonviolent tradition itself developed out of the culture and history of the Black Church. Thus, the Black Church was significant in strengthening and sustaining the Civil Rights Movement.

Although the Black Church as an institution has been important in supporting the black community in the face of anti-black racism and injustices, it is not representative of the black community or all black churches. Dr. Warnock discusses this in his book on the divided mind of the Black Church. In many ways, there is a difference in how black pastors perceive of the Black Church and how black theologians perceive of the Black Church. Some black churches refused to participate in the struggle for freedom and racial justice. They did not support the Civil Rights

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43 Frazier, The Negro Church in America.
45 Warnock, The Divided Mind.
Movement and preferred to maintain the status quo. Many of these church leaders saw social justice and activism as personal matters that should be kept separate from the church.\textsuperscript{46} Outside of the Church, there were others in the black community who saw justice as important but disagreed with the Black Church and the larger Civil Rights Movement on the best way to address it. This was especially true of younger generations who were growing angrier and more militant. Thus, the Black Power Movement developed. This Movement believed that the Black Church and the Civil Rights Movement weren’t doing enough to address racial justice in that the Civil Rights Movement took an accommodationist and integrationist approach.\textsuperscript{47} However, regardless of these perspectives, the substantial role of the Black Church in fighting for justice and freedom cannot be overlooked.

\textbf{A Look at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church}

I first visited Nineteenth Street Baptist Church (NSBC) on November 18, 2018. Although I had been to the church office to discuss this project, this would be my first time entering the main sanctuary. As my Uber dropped me off in front of the church, I noticed that directly to the right of the entrance is a large Black Lives Matter sign. This was the first sign, literally and figuratively, that this church has a vested interest in social—and, more specifically, racial—justice. After the sign, the next thing I noticed was a quote written across the top of the front of the church building: “To the glory of God and the brotherhood of man.” This quote is reminiscent of the Jesuit value “Ad majorem dei gloriam,” which means “for the greater glory of God and the welfare of humanity.” It challenges people to put their faith into action and to act justly. Religion is about one’s relationship with God, and love and care for others, our neighbors,

\textsuperscript{46} Raboteau, \textit{A Fire in the Bones}.
\textsuperscript{47} Raboteau, \textit{A Fire in the Bones}; Whelchel, \textit{The History and Heritage of African-American Churches}.
should extend out of that relationship. Thus, one’s faith is personal but not private as Rev. Jim Wallis often says in the course “Faith, Race, and Public Life.” There are three sets of glass doors at the front of the church, and there is a statement above each glass door. To the far left is Psalm 18:26 which says, “Blessed be he who cometh in the name of the Lord,” in the middle is the name of the church, Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, and to the far right is Matthew 11:28 which says, “Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.” Taken together, these quotes seem to describe a church that is committed to God and committed to serving others. It is also a place where people can find rest and renew their hope. Additionally, it is a church where all people can feel welcome, a theme that is reiterated in the pulpit and in the words of the members as well.

Upon entering the church, I noticed large stained-glass windows in the cove area directly across from the front doors where there are plaques people have dedicated to family members. I would later learn that these windows are from the original church on Nineteenth Street. The church recently voted to adjust these stain glass windows to make them more historically accurate, changing the hair texture and the hue of the people depicted. This is one way to demonstrate that the church values the lives of its black members and the black community in the images that are represented. While there is an awareness of the historical significance of these windows, there is also an awareness of the ways in which we have come to understand who Jesus was in a modern-day context that often defies the ways in which Jesus was historically presented to African Americans during slavery.

In addition to the stained-glass windows, I also notice the chandelier hanging from the ceiling in the narthex area. I mention this because it is mentioned in one of the interviews in

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49 Church business meeting, January 18, 2019.
questioning the role of NSBC in the community. Furthermore, this chandelier is a significant symbol of the class critique of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church as the church has often been described as the “bougie black church,” as another member mentions in her interview. In some ways, this chandelier seems to imply that NSBC is a church for black people from the upper socioeconomic classes.

I then entered the Fellowship Hall where there was a bulletin board with the current pastor as well as past pastors and older pictures of groups such as the Ushers Board and the choir from previous decades. The opposite bulletin board depicts the history of the church, a history of which they are proud. While these bulletin boards provide a brief snapshot of the history of NSBC, they fail to reveal the entire story, one the church is working on refining and synchronizing as it celebrates its 180th anniversary. My eyes continued to scan the Fellowship Hall. It is large and has a balcony area at the top and a stage at the front. The sides of the Fellowship Hall are slightly raised and have rails; however, the church does not yet have an elevator that can be used to move between its three floors. While there are aspects that demonstrate social awareness, the church is not fully accessible. On the stage in the Fellowship Hall, there were banners with the churches seven core values for changes they would like to see in the next five years: Increase Active Membership, Improve Membership Ministry Engagement, Invest in Our Children, Create A Dynamic Worship Experience, Modernize and Update the Church Plant, Sustain and Build a Dynamic Leadership Team, and Coordinate and Strengthen Existing Efforts. This will be a task led by the new pastor Rev. Dr. Darryl Roberts, who will be discussed in more depth later. The best way to understand a church is through its core values.

50 Interview with Participant 9.
Since that Sunday, I have learned more about the structure of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. I now know that the church has at least three floors with the second and third floors containing classrooms for youth. While some of the classrooms are used, many are not as the youth ministry at the church is in a process of rebuilding. While the church does not use these classroom spaces, it could permit the community to use them for programming, such as summer camps. Nevertheless, as noted in an interview, the church does not allow others to use the space and have declined requests to use it.51 Relating back to the building itself, the church office is at the back of the church, and there is a small chapel that is used for Grief Share and for the devotional before the Church School or Sunday School classes in Sunday mornings. The chapel is a more intimate space than the larger main sanctuary and provides a deeper sense of community. Along the main hall are several bulletin boards to introduce the new members, to recognize the work of the youth and those who graduated, to recognize the work of the world missions group and their Haiti 5K, and more. While the bulletin boards in the Fellowship Hall provide a snapshot of the history of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, this bulletin board provides a snapshot of the church in the contemporary moment. Together, the bulletins boards show the continued work of NSBC throughout history to today. On the wall by the church office, there are plaques dedicated to various pastors as well as several flyers related to social justice topics, such as affordable healthcare. This further emphasizes that Nineteenth Street Baptist Church has a role in public life and politics and is actively working to address the social injustices present in society.

When service started, I entered the sanctuary and was overwhelmed by its size as well as its emptiness. The sanctuary is very large, and it seems to swallow the members who attend. The

51 Interview with Participant 20, April 11, 2019.
sanctuary appears to seat at least five hundred people, but there are typically a little over one hundred seated in these sections on any given Sunday. It consists of three sections of seating with two inner aisles and two outer aisles. Each aisle is headed by an usher in a sleek uniform with a badge and gloves on their hands that seems to reflect the “bourgeoisie” culture that has been present at NSBC through the years. Yet, leadership positions, such as ushers, have been significant in providing black people spaces where they can lead in a society in which many leadership roles have been limited to white people, especially white men. Returning to the structure, there is also a balcony area where members can sit. Although the lower level is never full, there are always a few people in the balcony. The pulpit is at the front on a raised platform and next to it is the choir stand. There are typically four ministers in the pulpit and twenty people in the choir stand, thus there seem to be about one hundred thirty people on average attending each week. On the wall in the back, between the pulpit and choir stand, are three large metal crosses, one larger than the other two to represent the cross on which Jesus died. The windows in the sanctuary are stained-glass, but they are monochromatic and not as colorful or beautiful as the window from the old church in the cove area. Behind every church building is a story, from the selection of the color of the carpet to the selection of the stained-glass windows; as Rev. Jerry A. Moore Jr. has passed away, I am unable to hear the story of the building from him.

In many ways, Nineteenth Street Baptist Church is a microcosm of the Black Church in the United States today. One important aspect is the recognition of history and heritage in the Black Church and the recognition of the unique challenges faced by the members as black people in a society in which whiteness is the norm. This history may be oral, and it may be displayed on bulletin boards and in display cases. Church histories can also be found in archives, for churches

52 Interview with Participant 20, April 11, 2019.
that have those. The archives for Nineteenth Street Baptist Church are limited as files were lost in the move to 16th Street. Furthermore, the recognition of history and heritage is present in some of the celebrations, such as Black History Month programs, and even in simply providing a space where black people can obtain leadership and let their voices be heard and affirmed. Additionally, the general structure is the same, although the size of the church may vary. There is a seating area, most likely consisting of pews with hymnals and Bibles, a choir stand, and an elevated pulpit the pastor preaches from. There are also usually ushers to guide people to their seats, often dressed in white and wearing gloves and badges as a means of continuing tradition, but not always. Many black churches have stained-glass windows, some depict Biblical images and others are just colors. Black churches also have Fellowship Halls or meeting and gathering areas and classrooms where people can learn more about the Bible. These are just a few ways in which NSBC represents the larger Black Church institution, one that is personal and structural and institutional as well.

About Nineteenth Street Baptist Church

The church I have described is the new church. It is the church located at 4606 16th Street Northwest in a majority black neighborhood. Under the leadership of Pastor Jerry A. Moore, Jr., the church moved to 16th Street as he felt called by God to move through his recognition of the rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods.53 Yet, the threat of gentrification is still present in the community today. On Sunday, January 27, 2019, the church commemorated the move to the current location as it kicked off the 180th Church Anniversary, which was celebrated all year, by

walking around the Fellowship Hall and into the front doors of the church, accompanied by African drumming. On the first Sunday of the move to 16th Street, the church members marched several blocks to the new location, escorted by police cars. It is a memory that many members share as they tell me of their experiences at NSBC. Moreover, the 180th celebration included placing a pew from the original church at the front of the sanctuary. Thus, there are many efforts to recognize and commemorate the history of the church. There is also a cornerstone from the original church; however, there are no pictures of the original church as many of the church archives were lost in the move to 16th Street. The celebration that kicked off the 180th anniversary also included a celebration of the birthday of the oldest active member of NSBC. She will be 102 this year, and she was baptized into Nineteenth Street Baptist Church at age 12. It only takes one visit to gain an understanding of the pride and the history associated with the first black Baptist church in Washington, DC.

Officially, the history begins on August 29, 1839; there are many variations of the history of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. The history I will report on is the one found in the New Members Ministry Orientation Class Slides, but there is a more detailed history located on a bulletin board at the back of the church’s Fellowship Hall. According to the New Members Ministry Orientation Class slides, they were originally a part of the First Baptist Church of the City of Washington, DC which was founded in 1802 as a church with both black and white members. Nevertheless, the white members “decided to relocate” as a result of the growing black population in the church, and “they sold the property” to the black members on June 7, 1833.\textsuperscript{54} Thus, in some ways, Nineteenth Street Baptist Church developed as a counter-public to the public sphere contained within the white First Baptist Church. On August 29, 1839, Rev.

\textsuperscript{54} Information from New Members Orientation Class Slides received on January 26, 2019, 16.
Jeremiah Moore, Rev. Lewis Richards, Rev. Adam Freeman, Rev. William Parkinson, Charles P. Polk, Cephas Fox, Charles Rogers, John Buchan, Joseph Borrows, and Sarah Borrows began to organize the First Colored Baptist Church of Washington. Although they were going to be incorporated as the Baptist Church of Christ in Washington, they were incorporated as Nineteenth Street Baptist Church on November 16, 1870. While the church was originally located on the corner of Nineteenth and I Streets, on January 26, 1975, it moved to its current location on 16th Street.\textsuperscript{55}

There are several notable moments in the history of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. The church hosted the First Annual Convention of the National Federation of Afro-American Women. It was at this convention that the National Association of Colored Women was founded on July 21, 1896. The church also hosted a gathering of black Civil War veterans on the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war. This event is believed to have played a role in the establishment of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.\textsuperscript{56} Two notable past church members are Nannie Helen Burroughs, educator, civil rights activist, and suffragist, and Dr. Charles R. Drew, the surgeon who developed methods for storing blood plasma. This history, while not comprehensive, is one with which many members are familiar. In more recent history, in 2005, they began to ordain women as deacons and ministers. During the Obama presidency, Nineteenth Street Baptist Church hosted President Obama and his family twice, and the church also hosted President George H. W. Bush. These are just a few moments in the history of the Church.

\textsuperscript{55} “About Us & Church History,” Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, accessed February 1, 2019, http://everyblessing.org/about-us/.
\textsuperscript{56} Information from New Members Orientation Class Slides received on January 26, 2019, 20.
Additionally, the pastors are an important part of the history and legacy of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. While there were a variety of pastors who served from 1839 to 1881, the first pastor mentioned in detail in the New Members Orientation Class Slides is Reverend Doctor Walter H. Brooks, a former slave. It was under his leadership that the church grew to over 3,500 members.\textsuperscript{57} The next pastor was Reverend Doctor Jerry A. Moore Jr. who passed away on December 19, 2017 at age 99. The most recent pastor prior to the current pastor was Rev. Dr. Derrick Harkins who is now Senior Vice President of Union Seminary. He served as a faith advisor for the Obama Administration and was the National Director of Faith Outreach for the Democratic National Committee during the 2012 presidential campaign.\textsuperscript{58} I will share more information on the active roles these pastors played in their communities and discuss some of their specific policies as it relates to social justice in Chapter 4. Beyond their spiritual calling, they have been involved in civil rights work as well as politics. This theme extends beyond the pastors into the members as well.

The current pastor is Rev. Dr. Darryl D. Roberts, and his sermons and teachings play a role in reflecting the thoughts and beliefs of how the members of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church understand social justice in this contemporary moment. As this paper aims to understand the role of the Black Church in society today, I will be primarily focusing on the church under his leadership while giving special attention to historic efforts and programs. To provide more background, Rev. Dr. Darryl Roberts was installed on February 19, 2017.\textsuperscript{59} He has a Master of Divinity degree, Juris Doctorate degree, and a Doctor of Philosophy degree. He has received

awards for his service, and he has served on “the executive boards of Atlanta’s Concerned Black Clergy, the Atlanta Missionary Baptist Association, and DeKalb County’s NAACP.”60 As he has only been at NSBC for a few years, it is difficult to track his influence within the larger DC area currently. It is worth noting that he was chosen to serve on one of the Mayor’s Councils and opened the session of the US House of Representatives session as a guest chaplain on Tuesday, April 9th. Given the decision of the members to install him as pastor, one can infer that they believe that Rev. Dr. Roberts will be able to continue the legacy that has developed.

In addition to justice, education is also an important aspect of the legacy of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church that will become more prominent in Chapter 4 in which I discuss my interviews with current members. Rev. Dr. Darryl Roberts is the most recent in a line of learned pastors. Additionally, all the current ministers have a minimum of a Master of Divinity degree, and the past four senior pastors, including Rev. Dr. Roberts, have held doctorate degrees as well. This is one way in which Nineteenth Street Baptist Church differs from other mainline Baptist Churches, although it is a trend amongst progressive churches. As discussed in the next chapter, the degree of formal education a pastor has may vary based on congregation, a church’s values, and region. Nevertheless, Nineteenth Street Baptist Church can serve as an example of a progressive Black Church with an educated pastor, and it is worth exploring the links between social awareness and education.

**Summary**

The goal of this chapter was to provide background information into my research on the Black Church and its approach to social justice. I began with a literature review as a means of locating my research within the research that has been done by other scholars. I build on their

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research in addressing the contemporary moment and including the voices of laypeople from varying demographics. In addition to the intellectual genealogy of my work, I provide brief background on the Black Church as an institution and the role it has served within the black community, especially as it relates to the counter-public discussed in the introduction. In the next sections, I focus in on one example of a progressive Black Church within the Black Church institution, Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. Nineteenth Street Baptist Church is a church with a rich history of social justice. In the next chapter, I will focus specifically on elements of black preaching and the ways in which social justice is addressed in the pulpit by the current pastor, Rev. Dr. Darryl Roberts as he continues the church’s tradition of selecting pastor’s who are not only academically trained but social aware.
Chapter 2

Black Preaching

Preaching occurs when the pastor of the church gives a sermon or religious message believed to have been given to the pastor by God for the people. As it relates to the Black Church, there are characteristics of preaching that are unique to preachers within historically black church traditions. These characteristics result from a shared history of racial oppression, links to African roots, culture, and the everyday experiences of black people. Additionally, these elements tend to span denominations and associated theological differences, such as perceptions on baptism and other practices. Although there are several sources that address characteristics of black preaching, W.E. B. DuBois is one of the first to characterize the black preacher and the role of the black preacher in the wider society in his book *The Negro Church*. Most notably in my studies at Georgetown has been Henry Mitchell’s *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art*. The sources on black preaching, DuBois’, Mitchell’s, and others, differ only slightly.

One source that briefly chronicles the characteristics of black preaching is *Preaching with Sacred Fire*, which is an anthology of sermons by well-known and notable preachers throughout history. In analyzing these sermons through time, there are certain characteristics that are present throughout. One characteristic is the importance of the Bible. Black sermons often center around a key Bible story or scripture. Sometimes these stories are reimagined in the present day to make them easier to understand as well as directly applicable to the lives of the congregants. This extends beyond the Black Church tradition into other religious traditions as well. Moreover, this ties in the second characteristic listed which is “that the Bible is made to come literally alive

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by means of an eyewitness style of picture painting and narration.”\textsuperscript{62} Not only are the stories easier to understand, but congregants can see themselves reflected in the Bible stories and scriptures. Thus, next is what is described as existential exegesis or examples of these Bible stories in images and themes present in society today.\textsuperscript{63} For example, we could see asylum seekers along the border as reflective of Mary and Joseph seeking asylum from Herod in Egypt or see ourselves in the story of Jonah running from his calling.\textsuperscript{64} The black preacher strives to make the sermon relevant while respecting the sanctity of the Bible.

In addition to the role of the Bible, black preaching characteristics also include the methods through which one comes to know what one knows, and through which one gains revelation. Black preachers further their education, both formally and informally.\textsuperscript{65} There is privilege in a black preacher being able to attend a seminary or theological school in an elite setting such as the formal way in pursuing a Master of Divinity degree. Thus, many black preachers are self-taught and home-grown, most often preachers in rural areas. It is worth noting that some black churches require a Master of Divinity of their pastor as part of their by-laws or constitution. This is the case at Greater Mount Sinai Baptist Church, the church in which I grew up. While I cannot fully address it in this paper it is also worth analyzing the links between education and social awareness, specifically as it relates to perceptions of social justice.

Additionally, the black preacher believes that he or she or they does not operate within his or her or their own power but rather it is God working through them. There is an awareness of the Holy Spirit as a major actor in the creation and delivery of the sermon.\textsuperscript{66} For some, there is

\textsuperscript{62} Simmons, \textit{Preaching with Sacred Fire}, 7.
\textsuperscript{63} Simmons, \textit{Preaching with Sacred Fire}, 8.
\textsuperscript{64} Matt. 2:13-23; Jon. 2.
\textsuperscript{65} Simmons, \textit{Preaching with Sacred Fire}, 8.
\textsuperscript{66} Simmons, \textit{Preaching with Sacred Fire}, 8.
also an awareness of the presence of the ancestors. Regarding form, black sermons tend to be suspenseful and end on a note of hope or celebration.\textsuperscript{67} They inspire the congregants with the hope they need to overcome their personal trials and tribulations as well as the structural and institutional oppression they face in society as black people and members of other marginalized communities. Black preachers may whoop their last lines (say them with passion, expression, and rhythm) or end with a commonly known song, such as a hymn, that sums up their sermon. Some black preachers refer to the cross and resurrection, the ultimate symbol of hope in the Christian faith. Hence, black preaching is significant in the Black Church and serves as a source of education, revelation, and inspiration for members.

**Speaking Truth to Power: Social Activist Preaching and the Prophetic Voice**

In addition to the characteristics, *Preaching with Sacred Fire* also lists categories of preaching: social activist preaching, black identity preaching, cultural survival preaching, and empowerment preaching. While it is not listed as an official category, there is also prosperity preaching. Social activist preaching is liberation-focused and often employs “the prophetic voice.”\textsuperscript{68} This use of the prophetic voice further demonstrates the Black Church as a counter-public in that it allows one to challenge the structures and institutions within the broader society that are consistent with the public sphere. The preaching that takes place at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church is a mix between social activist preaching and preaching for cultural survival. In addition to employing the prophetic voice, Rev. Dr. Roberts also encourages congregants in their everyday lives and provides them with the inspiration they need to get through the week. He demonstrates a strong awareness of the personal as well as the structural and institutional.

\textsuperscript{67} Simmons, *Preaching with Sacred Fire*, 8.
\textsuperscript{68} Simmons, *Preaching with Sacred Fire*, 10.
As it relates to employing the prophetic voice, the prophetic is that pertaining to the prophets. Walter Brueggemann defines a prophet as “a poetic figure who stands outside the mainstream of public power and exposes what’s going on.” In society today, prophets are also referred to as truth tellers or those who speak truth to power. The role of the prophet can be traced to the Bible where God used the prophets to challenge the kings of the time and to call them out on the injustices they permitted and perpetrated. The prophets communicated God’s words to the people. Some of the prophets in the Bible are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Jonah as well as Jesus.

Many believe that the role of the prophets continues in society today. Furthermore, Brueggemann goes on to say that the experiences of black people make black churches more likely than others to be prophetic. Thus, some have recognized the link between the Black Church and the prophetic voice. Rev. Dr. King is often perceived as a prophet, and one could consider both Rev. Dr. William J. Barber III and Bree Newsome, the young woman who took down the confederate flag in South Carolina, modern-day prophets. These are people led by God to speak truth to power and addresses the injustices in society in the same way the prophets of old did. Nineteenth Street Baptist Church strives to embrace the call of the prophetic.

**Homiletics and Hermeneutics**

Both the social activist preaching and the cultural survival preaching that make up the sermons of Rev. Dr. Darryl Roberts are a combination of his homiletics and his hermeneutics. Homiletics is how the sermons is communicated, most often defined as the art of preaching, and

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hermeneutics deals with the way the Bible is interpreted. In social activist preaching and cultural surviving preaching, both the homiletics and hermeneutics, when employed effectively, contribute to a sermon that is liberating. The effectiveness of the homiletic is in the “experience” the sermon creates. There is an emphasis on evoking emotions within the members, which may result in them standing and clapping or shouting. Thus, the homiletic evokes a response within the listener. While I will analyze his sermons below, Rev. Dr. Roberts homiletics often entails bringing the members into the Biblical experiences and bringing the Biblical experiences to them. Additionally, he utilizes repetition of key themes and moments that often address injustices present in society today. Furthermore, it is in the cultural and historical vignettes shared, the evoking of African proverbs, quotes, hymns, and spirituals. The homiletics results in the spiritual and emotional response to the sermon and ensures that the message is communicated in a way in which the congregants can understand.

While the homiletics is like the clothing of the sermon, the hermeneutics is the body underneath that shapes the message that will be preached. The hermeneutic that often defines social activist preaching within the context of racial justice is black theology or black liberation theology, associated with Dr. James Cone. Much of hermeneutics within the context of black theology is reading the scripture through the lens of the black experience. Hence, we come to understand the Bible and Jesus in a specific way, one in which Jesus has a heart for the oppressed and the marginalized as he has similar marginalizing experiences himself. This perspective is often considered radical, especially given the history of Christianity and the ways in which it can function in society, such as the role white evangelicals played in the election of

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72 Warnock, The Divided Mind, 79.
President Trump. Not only does the sermon seem to imply a call to action, but it is based in a very particular interpretation of the Bible, one that is based in the historical context of the prophets and who Jesus was. In addition to the sermons, hermeneutics will also be present in the ways in which the members of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church discuss the scriptures in their interviews.

While homiletics and hermeneutics are significant in determining whether a Black Church learns social justice and the pastor preaches social justice, they do not determine action. While one would think that churches would practice what they preach, this is not always the case. Social activist preaching provides a strong foundation for social justice work, but it is not enough. The church must allow the sermons to motivate them to go beyond the four walls of the church and do the work of justice in the community. Nevertheless, it is important to note that some may not see social justice work as one of the roles of the church and view the church only in terms of its spiritual significance; however, this runs counter to the role of the Church within the Black Church tradition, especially as it relates to being a counter-public. This will be discussed more in depth in the next two chapters in which I analyze the responses of church members on the role of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in working for social justice and racial justice and the ways in which they understand scripture and the call of Christians to social justice. Even so, Rev. Dr. Roberts sermons are important in understanding the relationship between Nineteenth Street Baptist Church and social justice.

The Sermons of Rev. Dr. Darryl Roberts

Justice, God’s love and God’s presence, hope. These are themes and ideas that are often present in the sermons of Rev. Dr. Darryl Roberts. As I’ve mentioned, Rev. Dr. Roberts is a social activist preacher in his awareness of systems in place, but his sermons are also very
personal. His sermons are not without critique as a member mentioned on Sunday, January 27, 2019 that his sermons are too political; the fear of being too political is mentioned as a barrier to social justice work at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. Thus, the black Baptist church pastor is sometimes limited in what he or she or they can say as they answer to the members of the congregation who may have a variety of political beliefs. Nevertheless, the perception that the sermons are too political tends to be a rarity as many members seem to agree very much with what Pastor Roberts is preaching. In fact, some of the members interviewed discussed the need for the church to be more political in taking a stand against injustices. In his sermons below, I will examine the ways in which Rev. Dr. Roberts addresses social justice issues and politics from the pulpit. Preaching is one way in which social justice is present in Nineteenth Street Baptist Church.

On November 18, 2018, Rev. Dr. Roberts preached a sermon entitled “When You Have Reached the Breaking Point.” The scriptural reference was 1 Kings 19:1-9. In the sermon, he discussed how there are difficult questions in life like “What is my purpose? Why would anyone listen to what I have to say?” He goes on to say that “People feel like their voices and dreams don’t really matter.” To put the questions more in perspective, he connects them to the story of the Prophet Elijah, thus even in the scriptural reference there is an awareness of the call of the prophetic. In the story of Elijah, Jezebel, the current queen, issues a death sentence against Elijah for calling out the current injustices in the kingdom, and he flees out of fear. Yet, he is protected by God. The sermon returns to the personal as Rev. Dr. Roberts proclaims, “You’re here because there’s a cloud of witnesses…grandma and nem, daddy and nem… We’re standing on the

73 Interviews with Participant 5 and Participant 9.
74 Interviews with Participant 5 and Participant 9.
75 Sermon notes from November 18, 2018.
shoulders of those who came before us.” He goes on to proclaim, “You may be facing a helpless situation, but God has a plan.” As he continues the sermon, he addresses the symbol of the wilderness. He says, “In the wilderness, there is no healthcare because of a pre-existing condition.” He goes on to say that the voter suppression in the recent election, that of Stacey Abrams run for governor of Georgia, is evidence of this wilderness. The “young people growing up in poverty in a bad school system,” is also evidence of this wilderness. It is in the wilderness that we encounter multiple injustices; however, hope comes in the fact that “God provides life-giving nourishment, even in the wilderness.”

In this sermon, one social justice element is the mention of the prophet Elijah. As discussed previously, it is the prophets who are called to speak truth to power. Many socially aware preachers today will say they are called to do the same. The use of the story of Elijah reflects the prophetic hermeneutic. Moreover, in citing the protection of Elijah, in addition to God, there is mention of the ancestors and those who came before. This is a characteristic of black preaching; there is an awareness of the ancestors who paved the way for us. Furthermore, this demonstrates the role of religion through the years as a source of liberation while also address the history of oppression and racism that African Americans have had to endure. In the same way that God helped our ancestors, He can help us today, especially in situations in which we face injustices. The final symbol evoked is that of the wilderness. This is another motif that is often referenced in relation to social justice. Some may say that this current time we are living in, especially as it relates to the Trump administration, is a wilderness season. The wilderness image is present throughout the Bible. It is most often associated with trials and tribulations. In the wilderness, one’s faith is tested, such as the case when Jesus was tempted by the devil while he

76 Sermon Notes from November 18, 2018.
fasted in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. Nevertheless, there is hope in the fact that God provides in the wilderness. It is this hope that will not only get congregants through the difficult moments in their week, but it is this hope that renews one’s commitment to fighting for justice in a season that can seem hopeless and full of despair.

On January 20, 2019, Rev. Dr. Roberts preached a sermon entitled “God’s Guest List.” The scriptural reference for this sermon was Luke 14:15-24. It centers on the parable of a wealthy Pharisee man who has a party. It is worth noting that this parable is also mentioned as a scripture about social justice in one of the member interviews. As the story goes, when his invited guests decide not to attend, he invites everyone on the street to the party, people who Pharisees typically wouldn’t associate with. This may include homeless people, those who are less educated, prostitutes, and others society would have frowned upon. Rev. Dr. Roberts says that this parable provides a “lesson in true hospitality.” While this story demonstrates God’s love, He is “also a God of anger and wrath… God gets angry when we reject Him… when we rob the poor… abuse the poor and those with disabilities… demonize the stranger and would rather build a wall than show love.” Nevertheless, in furthering God’s love, Rev. Dr. Roberts goes on to tell us where Jesus goes to fill His guest list. He goes “out in the hood, the rec center, the shopping malls…the crack houses, the food pantry…he compels the furloughed, the heartbroken… the abused, heterosexuals, homosexuals, women, ex-felons…all have an invitation.” He ends with a confirmation that it is this message that “compels people to come….” Thus, the hope is in the fact that Jesus welcomes all to His table.

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77 Matt. 4:1-11.
78 Interview with Participant 9.
79 Sermon notes from January 20, 2019.
80 Sermon notes from January 20, 2019.
While many churches discuss the Kingdom of God in the abstract, few discuss it in its practicality. In this sermon, Rev. Dr. Roberts does just that. The Kingdom of God is an inverted Kingdom where “the last shall be first, and the first last.”  

It is one that challenges the very hierarchy and political system in place that exalts the powerful at the expense of the powerless. Hence, the current political system is not one that reflects God in that it often acts in ways that counter Him such as “rob[bing] the poor” and “demoniz[ing] the stranger.” Whereas some white evangelicals compared the election of President Trump with the coming of Jesus, Rev. Dr. Roberts is challenging that notion. He is speaking truth to power and calling out the president and others in power for taking actions that anger God through their treatment of the oppressed and marginalized. If we are to reflect Jesus, we need to be welcoming of everyone, especially those who are marginalized and oppressed, including women and members of the LGBTQ+ community who are often marginalized and oppressed within religious institutions in addition to society. This is one way in which Nineteenth Street Baptist Church is more progressive than other black churches. Nineteenth Street Baptist Church strives to be a welcoming church to members of the LGBTQ+ community, a fact cited by one of the young people I interviewed. Thus, there is social justice demonstrated in the concept of welcoming people, all people, to the table.

On January 27, 2019, Rev. Dr. Roberts preached a sermon entitled “What Do These Stones Mean to You?” The scriptural reference was Joshua 4:1-7. In these scriptures, the Israelites are crossing over the Jordan water on dry land as the Lord has stopped the waters to permit their crossing. It was after this sermon that a member mentioned that he might be too

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81 Matt. 20:16.
82 Sermon notes from January 20, 2019.
83 Interview with Participant 20, April 7, 2019.
political. After the scripture was read, he began with the fact that this year is “the 400th anniversary of African slaves being brought on slave ships.” He then went through the history of African Americans in the United States and how they have overcome trials through the years. The slaves fought for their freedom and found ways to provide for their families. We had the first black president and First Lady, but there was also birtherism and more hatred that revealed itself after the last election. Rev. Dr. Roberts says, “With so much hopelessness, our church anniversary inspires us to look back and look forward…If he did it before, he can do it again.” He can do the same for us in that “God still answers prayers and God still works miracles.” The miracle in the Bible was stopping the Jordan River, but it can take different forms for us today. Furthermore, it is God who will fight our battles and allow the hearts of our enemies to “melt in fear.”

Like the other two sermons, this sermon also demonstrates a certain hermeneutic and a symbol of liberation. To begin, the scripture itself is a continuation of the Exodus story. As Moses has died, the Israelites, an oppressed people on their way to freedom, are now being led into the Promised Land by Joshua. While there are people already in the Promised Land, God will give them deliverance from their enemies. The story of the Israelites is one that is often cited as a story of liberation and one that African Americans historically have referenced often. Like the Israelites, African Americans in the United States have struggled and have been oppressed and are now seeking freedom and liberation, are now seeking justice. Rev. Dr. Roberts addresses these struggles directly in his sermon. He brings it into the contemporary moment in addressing the struggles and injustices of today. While this sermon does not seem to include a call to action, it provides a hope in despair that only faith in God can offer, the faith that God will work.

84 Sermon notes from January 27, 2019.
85 Sermon notes from January 27, 2019.
miracles in our society today. In this sermon, the justice comes through the miracles of God and through Him fighting our battles. It is God who ensures that justice is served.

There are certain characteristics, some reflective of the characteristics of black preaching discussed earlier, that describe each of these sermons. Each of Rev. Dr. Roberts’ sermons entail roughly three points or lessons, an aspect often associated with black Baptist sermons. Moreover, as discussed previously, they all have a social justice aspect to them. In discussing social justice, there are specific symbols and motifs present such as the awareness of the ancestors, the story of the Israelites, and the role of the wilderness. They bring the stories in the Bible to life in a way that makes them relevant to the congregants and relevant to the contemporary moment. Most importantly, they always end on a note of hope. It is this hope that has sustained Black Church members through slavery and the Civil Rights Movement and continues to sustain black people today.

Summary

This chapter addresses the role of the elected leader, the preacher, in addressing social justice. While this may not be true of all churches, it is true of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. In this chapter, I situated Rev. Dr. Roberts within a broader black preaching tradition and defined him as a social activist and culturally surviving preacher who addresses structures of oppression and provides members with the inspiration and encouragement they need to make it through the week. This message is communicated through homiletics, the tools used to evoke emotions, and hermeneutics, the way the Bible is interpreted. The hermeneutic most often used by Rev. Dr. Roberts is a liberatory or prophetic hermeneutic. This chapter ends with a discussion of the ways in which these elements are present in specific sermons. As this chapter focused on the pastor, the next two chapters will shift the focus to the member of Nineteenth Street and how they
perceive social justice in the Bible and in their personal lives. We know that Nineteenth Street Baptist Church preaches social justice, but the next chapter examines if it practices it.
Research Methodology

In completing this research, I drew on a variety of sources. In addition to traditional academic sources, such as books and journal articles, I also utilized oral histories, in-person interviews, and ethnographic research. As it relates to oral histories, one interview on the legacy of Nannie Helen Burroughs was conducted by the principal investigator. The other oral histories consist of interviews from the HistoryMakers archives. These interviews and oral histories provided historical context, especially as it relates to pastors of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church who have passed away, Rev. Dr. Jerry A. Moore and Rev. Dr. Walter H. Brooks.

As it relates to the ethnographic aspect, I began attending services at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in November of 2018. I took notes on my initial observations, and I also took notes on the content of Rev. Dr. Roberts’ sermons. Additionally, I listened to the conversations taking place, attended a Church School class that studies and discusses the prophets and its relation to society today, and learned more about the church through such events as the church business meeting and the New Members’ Orientation Class. Through my research as well as my ministry journey, I have become a part of the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church family.

Additionally, I conducted twenty interviews of members at Nineteenth Street. The interviews were open invitation. Information for interviews were placed in the weekly bulletin, and announcements were made at Sunday service and at Wednesday Night Bible Study. The goal was to secure interviews from people from various ages, genders, and backgrounds. Interviews were conducted in-person after Sunday worship services and by phone throughout the months of February and March primarily with two additional interviews conducted in early April. The questions asked are the following: What is your age? What is your income range? How long
have you attended Nineteenth Street Baptist Church? How would you define social justice? What
does the Bible say about social justice and are there any scriptures you can think of that discuss
social justice? What is the role of Christians in the fight for social justice? How does Nineteenth
Street Baptist Church engage in social justice and racial justice work? How do you engage in
social justice and racial justice work in your personal life? What are areas of improvement as it
relates to social justice work, and what are barriers to social justice at Nineteenth Street Baptist
Church? In some interviews, social justice work was clarified as relating to civil rights and
community engagement. To protect the privacy of the participants, each participant, except for
Rev. Dr. Harkins and Rev. Dr. Roberts, will be referred to by a number. Their names are
significant as they were and are the senior pastor of Nineteenth Street, respectively.

In conducting this research, I hope to build on the work of both Dr. Sandra Barnes and
Dr. Marla Fredericks. I build on the work of Dr. Sandra Barnes in focusing on lay people in
addition to leadership as some of her research on the Black Church and social justice has been
based on interviews completed by church leaders. Thus, there is little Black Church scholarship
that obtains research from ordinary practitioners. Dr. Marla Fredericks work does this. I use her
research as a basis and build off her work through my inclusion of men in addition to women
with the hope of including varying demographics of age as well. These are the main ways in
which my work differs from that conducted by other scholars.

The Culture of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church

Before I discuss the results of my interviews, I want to provide background on the culture
and context of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. Nineteenth Street Baptist Church believes that
“God is our passion, serving people is our mission.”

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86 Information from New Members Orientation Class Slides received on January 26, 2019, 10.
describe the church very well. The vision of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church states that “We exalt the hope, power and glory of Jesus Christ through ministries that transform lives, churches and communities.”\textsuperscript{87} In these two statements, there is a focus on the people as well as the community, key aspects in understanding social justice. They also provide some context into the role of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church within the community. One role relates to “transforming” lives, this can be interpreted as spiritual and material transformation.

Furthermore, the mission statement is the following:

The mission of the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church is to profoundly experience, joyfully celebrate, and meaningfully share God’s grace. We do this through Christ centered worship, biblical instruction, prayer, nurturing fellowship, and caring acts that are reflective of our love for God and one another. We, through the power of the Holy Spirit, proclaim the Gospel and Jesus Christ to all people while supporting the work of missions in our church, our community, our country and the world.\textsuperscript{88}

Hence, “the work of missions” also seems to imply the necessity of social justice work in Nineteenth Street Baptist Church as part of its mission and vision.

Like some other black churches, NSBC has service on Sundays at 10:00 AM, and services are preceded by Church School or Sunday School classes at 8:45 AM. There is also a weekly bible study and a weekly prayer meeting. The music on Sunday consists of hymns, gospel songs (traditional and more contemporary), and worship songs. For those unfamiliar, the liturgy on Sunday consists of opening worship songs by the choir, a scripture and opening prayer (the call to worship), a responsive reading, a time of meet and greet (passing of the peace), a hymn, a time of corporate prayer, and the offering. Following the offering is the preparatory song followed by the sermon. This liturgy is similar, if not the same, to other black Baptist churches in the United States. At Nineteenth Street, there is a senior pastor, Rev. Dr. Darryl Roberts, an

\textsuperscript{87} Information from New Members Orientation Class Slides received on January 26, 2019, 13.
\textsuperscript{88} Information from New Members Orientation Class Slides received on January 26, 2019, 13.
executive pastor, and several men and women ministers. There are deacons, those tasked with helping the pastor carry out his mission and vision, and deaconesses, sometimes the deacon’s wives or women who would also help the pastor carry out his mission and vision primarily before women could be deacons. The deaconesses have their own goals and missional tasks that they complete, and the deaconesses are very active at NSBC. Within the leadership of the church, there are also trustees or those who handle money and other ministry leaders, such as those who lead the Church School classes. This leadership team is also like other black Baptist churches, although women are not yet ordained as deacons and ministers in all black Baptist churches. Furthermore, NSBC adheres to the Baptist articles of faith or theological statements of belief. Thus, NBSC shares many similarities to other black Baptist Churches in the United States and is thus reflective of a certain common black Baptist church culture.

Yet, within each individual church, there is also a unique culture that develops. The culture that has developed within Nineteenth Street Baptist Church is one of social justice and an awareness of the prophetic calling. This is not only evident in the sermons of the pastor but in the Church School classes, in the prayers, and in the casual conversations as well. The Church School class that I attend is one that examines the Prophets. The Bible serves as the text for analysis, in contrast to Sunday School books with lessons, and they have been studying the prophets for about three years. After reading through a chapter or two of one of the books of the prophets in the Bible, we discuss how it applies to society. The discussion on Sunday, January 20th indirectly referenced Trump (we did not address him by name) and included topics related to the government shutdown and the “disrespectful” and “racist” actions of the white Covington High School Boys in Make America Great Again Hats at the Indigenous Peoples rally.89 In

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89 Ethnographic notes, January 20, 2019.
addition to this Church School class, every Sunday during service, there is an altar call prayer that often references social justice issues from homelessness to modern-day slavery to unequal education systems. After church, much of the discussion surrounded the harm caused by the president and ways to address the injustices present. Thus, the members seem to be socially aware and committed to justice.

There are other factors as well that demonstrate the culture of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in the face of injustices. While the government shutdown was primarily an economic injustice, there were racial undertones as well. NSBC responded to the government shutdown in a variety of ways. The food pantry provided groceries for those impacted by the government shutdown. In one day, they served 191 people and ran out of food.\(^90\) The Deaconesses also decided to create a prayer line specifically for furloughed workers. Additionally, the Benevolence Committee was willing to assist those who reached out anonymously with whatever they needed, financial assistance or otherwise. Funds for the Benevolence fund are collected once a month to help those within the church as financial needs arise. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the Benevolence Committee functioned during the government shutdown in the way it typically functions, and there is no report on how much financial assistance was provided to those in need. Hence, the true impact of this response was questioned in one of the member interviews discussed in the next chapter.\(^91\) During the shutdown, NSBC also had Pepco come to the church to negotiate payment plans for those for whom Pepco is there electricity provider. Thus, Nineteenth Street Baptist Church responded in direct and indirect ways to the government shutdown.

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\(^{91}\) Interview with Participant 1.
As it relates to racial justice and reconciliation more specifically, one notable event took place on August 12, 2018, the day that the Unite the Right rally, a white supremacist rally, was set to take place in Washington, DC. On that day, NSBC held a rally with First Baptist Church, a predominantly white church, and New Baptist Covenant at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial. It was a time of prayer and reflection, and it was discussed on the following platforms: The Joe Madison Show, The Coach Butch McAdams Show, Sojourners Magazine, Auburn Seminary, EthicsDaily, and Baptist News Global.92 There is significant symbolism in this rally; however, one should question if the significance goes beyond the symbolic.

Nineteenth Street Baptist Church has also demonstrated a commitment to racial justice and other forms of justice in other ways. As it relates to the case of asylum seekers, NSBC stands by those seeking asylum. While the church did not decide to serve as a sanctuary, they did agree to let an immigrants’ rights organization use the church as a meeting space as the church is a part of the DMV Sanctuary Congregation Network. Furthermore, the 2018 Annual Report stated that the “New Members Ministry assisted in the distribution of water/snacks to participants in the March for Our Lives Vigil and Rally.”93 The report does not include information into whether NSBC members were active participants in the rally.

All in all, Nineteenth Street Baptist Church talks a lot about social justice. There is an awareness of social justice present in the discussion of its founding as the first black Baptist church in Washington, DC. Justice is a part of the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church legacy. Many members grew up in NSBC, and their families have been attending for generations. Each member is proud of the legacy of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church and the role they play in

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92 Nineteenth Street Baptist Church (@Everyblessing.org), Facebook post, August 10, 2018, https://www.facebook.com/Everyblessing.org/photos/a.948055895325477/1324985857632477/?type=3&theater
93 Nineteenth Street Baptist Church 2018 Annual Report, 27.
furthering that legacy. Furthermore, it is a legacy that is integrated with the history of African Americans in the United States, one in which black people have fought for freedom and found ways to assert their voices and agency in a society that would work to oppress them. This legacy entails not only fighting for one’s own liberation but working towards ensuring that all people have freedom.

Furthermore, NSBC is aesthetically attempting to address social justice through the placement of the Black Lives Matter sign in front of the church and the desire to make the stained-glass window more historically accurate as well as through the items placed on the bulletin boards around the church. Through homiletics and hermeneutics, Rev. Dr. Roberts conveys social activist sermons that continue in the black preaching tradition and bring the Bible into the contemporary moment in a way that offers hope and sometimes issues a call for action. Additionally, the members themselves pray about and discuss social justice issues in the contemporary moment. While social justice is present in the words of the pastors and the members, the next chapter will examine whether their words are backed up by action and if their faith is paired with works.\(^4\)

In addition to social justice, it is also important to address the demographics present in Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. Some of these are represented in the interviews conducted. As previously mentioned, I conducted twenty interviews. I also completed an oral history. The people interviewed range in age from twenty years old to eighty-nine years old. In my sample, there were two young adults in their twenties, and ten people were seventy years old and older. These is reflective of the demographics of the church itself in which many members are older.

\(^{94}\) James 2:14-26.
adults and senior adults, and there are very few, only a handful of, millennials and young adults. There are also a few children and teenagers at NSBC as there are few young families.

Historically, Nineteenth Street Baptist Church has been considered a church whose members consist of those who would be considered in the upper middle to upper income socioeconomic classes. It is a church where the members have historically been doctors, lawyers, educators, and the notable activists of the time. There are still many doctors, lawyers, and educators, a very large percentage, at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church today. While I did not get everyone’s income ranges, eight of the people interviewed who reported their incomes make $100,000 or more, the most of those who reported their incomes. One person made between $75,000 and $100,000, and four people make between $48,000 and $75,000. One person made between 0 and $24,000. As it relates to education, as I know of as there was no question pertaining to education level, six of the people I interviewed hold doctoral degrees, one completed some doctoral work, and one is in the process of completing a doctoral degree. At least eighteen of the people I interviewed seem to be college educated. Thus, in addition to being from upper level income ranges, the members also seem to be highly educated.

Additionally, there were six men and fifteen women, including the woman I interviewed for the oral history of Nannie Helen Burroughs. These statistics seems to be reflective of the participation of women in the church. Most members of the church appear to be women. Women serve on several ministries, and there are also women in leadership positions as ministers, deacons, deaconesses, and ushers. It is also worth noting that I interviewed three couples including Rev. Dr. Roberts and his wife. As it relates to years attended, five people stated they had been a member of Nineteenth Street for most of their lives. Eleven people have attended Nineteenth Street for thirty years or more. Thus, once people join Nineteenth Street, they tend to
stay at Nineteenth Street. These demographic statistics are also significant in understanding the
culture of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. While they strive to be inclusive, it is worth
interrogating the impact this culture can have on those who do not seem to fit within the
statistical majorities at NSBC.

What is Social Justice?

Theorist John Rawls defines justice as fairness in a liberal society in his life works. His
theory of justice entails two main principles. The first principle is that all should have basic
liberties and rights. The second principle entails “equality of opportunity” and an economy that
allows difference in a way in which all benefit. In conducting interviews, I allowed the
participants to define what social justice means to them. Some of the older members struggled to
define social justice itself; however, they stated that it is not something that everyone presently
has. In defining social justice, there were key terms that reemerged in various definitions. The
terms are fairness, equity, and equality. Thus, social justice is working towards fairness, equity,
and equality for all in society. In some ways, this is reflective of how John Rawls defines justice.
For many, social justice covers a variety of areas and institutions such as the economic system,
the education system, and housing. This shows an awareness of the structural and institutional
aspects of injustice in society. Additionally, the members described social justice as working
towards change, although few defined what this change would look like. It was stated that the
change would bring about “equality,” but even this is vague as it does not define what the ideal
society will look like.

Furthermore, those interviewed discussed the importance of “helping,” “assisting,”
“advocating for,” and “standing up for” those in need or those without a voice and working

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towards “access” for all; this is doing “what’s right.” This is significant in that it recognizes the privilege that the members have in that they can use their voices to advocate for others. A few interviews addressed the laws in place that should be changed, a more specific mention of the structural and institutional aspect. Only two people used the term “oppressed,” and only one person each used the terms “marginalized” and “privileged” in their definitions. Unlike the others interviewed, Participant 18 also addressed the mental stressors that a lack of justice can cause as well as the impact it has on generations. For that participant, in addition to being structural and institutional, a lack of social justice also has emotional and physical implications. Another rarity was Rev. Dr. Harkins’ mention of social justice as holding people accountable. It is in holding people accountable that we can ensure that there is justice in deed and practice, not just in word. Together, the interviews provide a comprehensive definition of social justice. For the members, social justice is defined in terms of structures, sometimes, but rarely, linked to legislation, and involves being a voice to the voiceless or advocating for the marginalized. The next few sections will dig deeper in discussing social justice in relation to the Bible and address the role of Christians in fighting for social justice as defined by the members of NSBC.

**Social Justice in the Bible: Prophets, Parables, and Other Scriptures**

In asking the question of social justice, the spiritualized element is addressed as members work to define social justice through the lens of the Bible. It is their Christian faith that grounds them within the social justice work that they do inside and outside of the church. As many people I spoke with mentioned, social justice is present throughout the Bible, notably in the stories of the prophets such as Moses in Exodus, Amos, Ezekiel, and Micah, and in the life of Jesus. The mention of Moses in Exodus is significant as the exodus story is one that African Americans
have been pulling on for generations as a source of liberation in the Bible. It is in Exodus that Moses says to Pharaoh “Let my people go,” and the Israelites begin their journey to freedom in the Promised Land.\textsuperscript{98} There is also mention of what some consider a more modern-day prophet, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who followed the example set in the Bible.\textsuperscript{99} Regarding the prophets, we often discuss in the previously mentioned Church School Class, of which Participant 14 is one of the teachers, that “We’re living a split screen time. The same things that God required of us as far as social justice are things that we must do and continue to do.”\textsuperscript{100} Thus, the Prophets are relevant today as God continues to warn us of the damaging results of our actions. Furthermore, in regard to Jesus, a prophet in the New Testament, Participant 1 says “Jesus example was he would acknowledge there was a problem and he would do something about it and yes he prayed and yes he would do all the things to keep himself strong spiritually, but he would also take action and speak truth to power, and I think that we’re missing that a lot in the times that we’re in.”\textsuperscript{101} This response emphasizes the importance of putting faith with works. It is not enough to only speak on social justice, but one must act on behalf of social justice as well.

As it relates to specific scriptures mentioned, Micah 6:8 was mentioned five times, and it says: He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly\textsuperscript{[a]} with your God.\textsuperscript{102} This is thought to be a governing scripture in defining how we should live as Christians. Additionally, Matthew 25 was mentioned three times as well as in Participant 14’s definition of social justice. Matthew 25:31-

\textsuperscript{98} Exod. 8-9.  
\textsuperscript{99} Interview with Participant 2.  
\textsuperscript{100} Interview with Participant 14.  
\textsuperscript{101} Interview with Participant 1.  
\textsuperscript{102} Mic. 6:8.
46 is the portion referenced in relation to social justice, and verses 34 through 40 cover the main point. They say:

34 “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ 37 “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ 40 “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

Like Micah 6:8 this is often also a governing scripture as it relates to how one should live a just life. Rev. Dr. Roberts defines the justice work of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church through these scriptures. Whereas Micah 6:8 calls one to “act justly,” Matthew 25 explains what justice looks like in action. How do we ‘act justly’? We act justly by “helping,” “assisting,” “advocating for,” and “standing up for” the ‘least of these.’

Other scriptures and stories mentioned include that of the parable of the rich man and the table, the scripture that says "Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow," the beatitudes, the Psalms and Proverbs as well as the stories of Jacob and Esau, the woman at the well, and Joseph. In the parable of the great banquet found in Luke 14:15-24, there is a table set where all are welcome. When the wealthy of the nation decline the invitation, the seats are filled with all types of people from the streets, people who wouldn’t typically be invited. Additionally, they are invited to sit at the head of the table, a place typically reserved for the wealthy and those of the highest class.

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104 Interview with Rev. Dr. Roberts.
105 Interviews with Participants 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, and 19.
106 Deut. 27:19.
saying, “So my thoughts around what the scripture says there is not only do we need to be able to create space at the table for others but not to put them at the back of the table because we figure that their social class or race or even their gender positions them in that way. The other part is that we are called as Christians to help set a table so that everybody can come and everyone can feast together, regardless of race, regardless of class, regardless of all the other –isms that are nowhere in the space of God…”\textsuperscript{108} The other scriptures mentioned tell us how we should live, and the stories display instances of untraditional justice. For example, Participant 15 discusses the woman at the well. Jesus approaches a Samaritan woman, who Jews wouldn’t typically interact with. She is a woman who would have traditionally been frowned upon by society as she has had several husbands. Yet, Jesus offers her justice in offering her living water rather than condemning her as others would.\textsuperscript{109} Thus, there is justice present throughout the Bible. Even those who could not cite specific scriptures stated that social justice is in the Bible. Furthermore, as it relates to scriptures, it is interesting to note that the New International Version was most used in quoting scriptures. This version is more modern than the King James Version used in some more traditional black Baptist churches.

**Being Like Jesus: The Role of Christians in the Fight for Social Justice**

After the members discussed social justice in the Bible, the follow up question regarded the role of Christians in fighting for social justice. In answering this question, there were some trends that emerged. Five of the eighteen members discussed the role of Christians as being like Jesus and doing as the Bible says. Participant 18 says of this, “So, I think it is, you cannot call yourself a Christian, one who follows Jesus the Christ, one who follows Jesus’ teaching, and one who would say I know Jesus but do not know the social justice Jesus because He was always

\textsuperscript{108} Interview with Participant 9.

\textsuperscript{109} Interview with Participant 15; John 4.
talking about the social inequities of His time.”¹¹⁰ Thus, in being like Jesus one will actively address injustices. Furthermore, in following the example set by Jesus, we set an example for others to follow. This idea of being an example was addressed in three interviews. Moreover, two interviews went beyond being an example to being a light for others, especially the marginalized and “less fortunate.”¹¹¹ Hence, the primary role of Christians in fighting for social justice is to be like Jesus which entails setting an example and being a light; however, we must question what this looks like in practice.

Some of the other responses seem to respond to this question of what it means to be like Jesus. According to those interviewed, it is important that Christians love others, pray, treat people fairly, and ensure that the needs of all are met. As it relates to being like Jesus and loving others, Rev. Dr. Harkins says being like Jesus means that we should “be about love that liberates, truth that strengthens.”¹¹² Thus, Jesus not only shows love but also “speaks truth to power.”¹¹³ One way in which we show love is treating people fairly, as three people discussed in their interviews. It is also important to pray. It is interesting that only two of the twenty people I interviewed mentioned prayer as the responses may have been very different in a less progressive church. It is also important to note that five of the twenty responses stated or implied that Christians must “ensure” that everyone’s needs are met. Thus, advocacy is very important. Of all the responses, Participant 16 gave the most comprehensive explanation of what the role of Christians is in fighting for social justice. She says:

“I think Christians should be central voices and activists in the fight for social justice. The church as an institution is an organizing platform that allows people to identify and lobby for the

¹¹⁰ Interview with Participant 18.
¹¹¹ Interview with Participants 5 and 18.
¹¹² Interview with Rev. Dr. Harkins.
¹¹³ Interview with Rev. Dr. Harkins.
needs of their community that they should be addressed by the government. Churches as communities of Christ and fellowship also play a role in supporting the needs of communities that have fallen through the cracks for politics or economic reasons. Spiritually, we should be praying together in communion for justice here on earth. Theologically, we would hear from God through the preaching and teaching to have a clearer vision of what God expects for us to do as Christians in promoting social justice.”\(^{114}\)

Thus, these interview responses give us insight into what members of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church perceive is the role of the Black Church in addressing social justice. First, the role of the Black Church is to be like Jesus. Being like Jesus implies taking an active role in working towards and fighting for justice and equality for all. The church is to show love in action, and that goes beyond just praying for change. In fighting for social justice, the church sets an example that others can follow.

**Summary**

This chapter examines the role of the preacher as well as the scriptural understanding as it relates to the Black Church and social justice. It is the preacher who plays a significant role in preaching and teaching social justice, thus the members become familiar with social justice in the Bible and aware of the varying injustices present in society today or their familiarity and awareness is confirmed and expanded upon, which is the case at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. In the Black Church where there is social activist preaching, the result is an understanding of scriptures that recognizes the need to advocate for liberation and justice. This understanding of the scriptures trickles down to the members. Thus, the members see the importance of social justice in the Bible and see themselves as having an active role in

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\(^{114}\) Interview with Participant 16.
addressing social injustices. Nevertheless, this can be viewed as a trickle up phenomenon as well. This is true for Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. NSBC selects pastors who address social justice as they see their pastors as social justice leaders as well. Hence, the pastor at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church has a mandate to address social justice. The pastor sets the vision, and it is executed by the members. Yet, the vision aligns with the social justice history and legacy of the church. The role of the members themselves in addressing social justice will be examined more in the next chapter.
Chapter 4
Creating A Space for Us: Women in Nineteenth Street Baptist Church

The role of women in Nineteenth Street Baptist Church has changed and evolved over time. Today, three of the nine ministers are women, and women serve on the deaconess board, deacon board, ushers ministry, and in several other capacities. Nevertheless, while women have always been empowered at Nineteenth Street, they have not always been empowered within certain leadership positions, such as minister. As an institution, the Black Church has actively worked to empower black men at the expense of black women, mainly because the church historically served as one of a few spaces that black men could lead and assert their agency. While there have always been black women who felt God calling them to ministry, church politics joined with scriptures that speak against women’s voices have limited them to traditional roles, such as that of teacher, and have prohibited them from the pulpit.115 This is still true today. Yet, women at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church have overcome gender barriers and will continue to overcome them as they have advocated for their rights and the rights of others as well. Women have been and continue to be the heartbeat of the ministry, with and without titles. Thus, it is worth examining the changing role of women at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church as they worked to create space for themselves within the Black Church and within society more broadly.

The role of women at NSBC begins with Rev. Dr. Walter H. Brooks. One cause Rev. Dr. Brooks advocated for was women’s education. His advocacy played a role in the founding of Hartshorn Memorial College, a black women’s college.116 He also advocated for women in other

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115 1 Cor. 14:34.
116 Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent.
ways, although he did not advocate for women as ministers explicitly. It was Nineteenth Street Baptist Church under Rev. Dr. Brooks that held the convention in which the National Association of Colored Women was formed.\textsuperscript{117} Thus, Rev. Dr. Brooks is significant within the history of women’s advocacy, but the greater influence comes through the strong women who attended Nineteenth Street Baptist Church at that time. One such notable woman is Nannie Helen Burroughs. While Rev. Dr. Brooks supported women’s rights, it was Nannie Helen Burroughs who acted in a way that opened doors for others and made great progress for women within the Black Church and society at large. Thus, it is worth including information about Nannie Helen Burroughs because of her significant influence and her notability in Washington, DC specifically. Like many members throughout Nineteenth Street Baptist Church history, Burroughs wanted to be an educator; however, colorism prevented her from obtaining a job as a teacher. As she was active in the church, both Rev. Dr. Brooks and Rev. Dr. Moore "took her under their wings."\textsuperscript{118} One significant way in which Nannie Helen Burroughs worked towards justice was the founding of the Nannie Helen Burroughs School, originally known as the National Training School for Girls. It was a boarding school that taught "the broom, the bath, and the Bible," as told by Shirley Hayes, who led the school for some time.\textsuperscript{119} This school was unique in that it prepared black women for work as domestic servants. While it appealed to what we would consider respectability politics today, it was significant in preparing black women to work in a largely white world.

\textsuperscript{117} Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (The HistoryMakers A2013.007), interviewed by Larry Crowe, April 25, 2013, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive. Session 1, tape 3, story 1, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham describes the importance of churches in the black community.
\textsuperscript{118} Oral history with Shirley Hayes.
\textsuperscript{119} Oral history with Shirley Hayes.
Dr. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham provides additional information on Nannie Helen Burroughs in Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920. Nannie Helen Burroughs was very active in advocating for a more active role for women in the Black Church specifically. Thus, she began “the Woman’s Convention, Auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention.” She provided pamphlets on how black women should live and behave. In addition to her school, she is also most known for publicizing “National Women’s Day,” a day to recognize the contributions of black women within the church, which is still celebrated at many black Baptist churches today. Also notable is her founding of the 1920 National Association of Wage Earners, her role in the NAACP and advocating for civil rights, and her role in advocating for women’s suffrage. Thus, Nannie Helen Burroughs advocated for black women within an institution that did not appear to be actively advocating for them and worked to ensure that the Woman’s Convention remained independent within the Black Baptist Church so that black women maintained the power and leadership within it. When there was no space for black women, she created spaces and protected them from patriarchy and sexism.

As it relates to other pastors at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, there is little on how Rev. Dr. Jerry A. Moore Jr. advocated for women. We know that he supported Nannie Helen Burroughs; however, women were not ordained as ministers or deacons under his leadership, and they also couldn’t serve as ushers. It is noted that he never supported the idea of women ministers. Hence, Rev. Dr. Moore seemed to do very little to further the cause of women. In contrast to Rev. Dr. Moore, Rev. Dr. Harkins not only advocated for women in ministry but

120 Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent, 150.
121 Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent, 161.
122 Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent, 219, 220, 211.
123 Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent.
124 Interview with Participant 15.
incorporated them into the leadership of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. Rev. Dr. Harkins was the first pastor of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church to ordain women ministers and women deacons as well as allow women ushers, thus elevating the roles of women in leadership at the church. Rev. Dr. Roberts continues this work of advocating for women by working to maintain Nineteenth Street’s involvement with the National Council of Negro Women and continuing to ordain women as ministers and deacons.¹²⁵

The church has come a long way in its elevation of women in leadership. Of the eight associate ministers, four of them are women, thus the distribution is equal. Women serve in every major ministry and area of the church, largely outnumbering the men.¹²⁶ Yet, it is worth noting that the senior pastor, assistant pastor, and youth minister are men. Nineteenth Street Baptist Church has yet to have a woman as its senior pastor. As it relates to women’s rights more broadly, none of the interviews cited efforts to advocate for equal pay for women as they primarily cite how far the church has come in its treatment of women. Still, Nineteenth Street Baptist Church has been very effective in elevating the voices of black women within the church.

**We Matter: Addressing Racial Justice at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church**

Nineteenth Street Baptist Church was founded as a result of racism in that it was founded by the black members of the white First Baptist Church after the white members left, yet it has provided a counter-public in its advocacy of racial justice over the past 180 years. The presence of NSBC has worked to affirm the lives of black people, yet throughout history, the pastors and members have worked to go beyond that in serving and advocating for the black community in a white hegemonic society. Much of this work has been done through ministries, organization and church partnerships, and even in the personal lives of members.

¹²⁵ Interview with Rev. Dr. Darryl Roberts.
¹²⁶ 2018 Member Directory distributed on April 14, 2019.
Under Rev. Dr. Brooks there was a social outreach ministry that oversaw the work of the church as it relates to advocating for the marginalized within the black community. He also worked to make black churches independent of white churches in the same way that Nannie Helen Burroughs worked to make black Baptist women independent of men through a convention.127 As it was at one of the heights of black intellectual and cultural development, in some ways, the work of Rev. Dr. Brooks as it relates to racial justice can be viewed in terms of some of the people with which he worked and associated. For example, he corresponded with Frederick Douglass, and he worked with Carter G. Woodson. Additionally, Charles Drew, known for organizing the first blood bank and his work with blood transfusions, and Wiley Branton, a well-known lawyer and director of the Voter Education Project (VEP) that worked with SNCC, were members of the church.128 The notable community leaders extend beyond these and include judges, educators, and black sorority and fraternity leaders as well. Thus, the church was full of people who were actively advocating and working towards justice for black people. Participant 20 says of these leaders that they “made sure we [the African American community] were taken care of and pursued rights for everyone, justice for all.”129 Rev. Dr. Brooks’ granddaughter, Dr. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Harvard professor and historian, describes Rev. Dr. Brooks as a “race man” who is “progressive” and subsequently leads a

128 Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (The HistoryMakers A2013.007), interviewed by Larry Crowe, April 25, 2013, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive. Session 1, tape 2, story 8, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham describes her paternal grandfather’s social activities.
Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (The HistoryMakers A2013.007), interviewed by Larry Crowe, April 25, 2013, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive. Session 1, tape 2, story 6, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham talks about her grandfather’s pastorate of the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.
Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (The HistoryMakers A2013.007), interviewed by Larry Crowe, April 25, 2013, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive. Session 1, tape 3, story 2, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham talks about her paternal grandfather's progressive politics.
129 Interview with Participant 20.
“progressive” church.\textsuperscript{130} It is worth noting that the church is described as progressive throughout its history, and it is a church that is still considered progressive today. It is also worth noting that Rev. Dr. Brooks was also involved in the Afro-American Council. Thus, racial justice was a central theme under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Brooks.

I will include some of the personal information we have on Rev. Dr. Moore in this section on racial justice as much of his work seems to have a broader impact as it relates to racial justice; however, he took a more passive role within addressing racial justice in and through the church. I will note that this lack of active participation could be a result of his Republican political beliefs; however, I cannot verify any correlation. Rev. Dr. Moore says of this passive role:

Well, there were no programs except those programs run by the auxiliaries. Every auxiliary was deciding what it was gonna do. Now, I tried to encourage them in what they were doing. They had good programs. For instance, there was one club that had had about four hundred members. And, they fed the hungry and clothed the naked, made visits to prisons, and they looked after senior citizens. What they now call senior citizen's homes, down at Blue Plains [Washington, D.C.], they had the Home for the Aging [Washington Home for the Aged and Infirm, Washington, D.C.]. Which was run mostly voluntarily. And, this club used to haul food down there. I've carried many of bag of potatoes and, crates of oranges, and onions on my back, down there at that time to try to help these people. So, I mostly encouraged those groups that were trying to do good.\textsuperscript{131}

Hence, Rev. Dr. Moore allowed the members to guide the work of the church as he conducted justice work within the more political aspect of his personal life. As it relates to Rev. Dr. Moore as an individual, he served on the DC City Council. In that position he advocated for

\textsuperscript{130} Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (The HistoryMakers A2013.007), interviewed by Larry Crowe, April 25, 2013, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive. Session 1, tape 3, story 2, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham talks about her paternal grandfather's progressive politics.

\textsuperscript{131} Reverend Jerry A. Moore, Jr. (The HistoryMakers A2007.171), interviewed by Janet Sims-Wood, April 27, 2007, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive. Session 1, tape 4, story 6, Reverend Jerry A. Moore, Jr. recalls the programs at the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.
transportation as well as for black businesses. Because of his political influence, he was offered an ambassadorship in Lesotho by President George H. W. Bush; however, he turned it down because of his mother-in-law’s declining health. Additionally, he served as a chaplain in the DC Detention Center. It was under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Moore that Nineteenth Street moved to Sixteenth Street following the rapid gentrification of the area. It was a difficult and somewhat controversial decision, yet he felt it was the best means of maintaining the church.

Furthermore, under Rev. Dr. Moore, Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, or rather the members of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, participated in the Civil Rights Movement. Rev. Dr. Moore participated in the March on Washington, but he was not the only member of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church participating in the Civil Rights Movement. In one of his interviews, he discusses a time in which members of the church participated in a sit-in at a racist restaurant. Of this he says:

Yes. You had what was called Thompson's Restaurant [Washington, D.C.]. And, like other white establishments it was segregated. Now, Dr. Jernagin, J.H. Jernagin [sic. William H. Jernagin], pastor of Mount Carmel Baptist Church [Washington, D.C.], and Miss Terrell [Mary Church Terrell], and Dr. Brooks [ph.] of the Congregational church went and sat-in at Thompson's Restaurant. Of course, they were denied service. They took their case to court, all the way to the [U.S.] Supreme Court, and they ruled that this was unconstitutional. They found what was called the laws, I believe, of 1876, which were a part of the District of Columbia [Washington, D.C.] laws at that time. When the laws of the District of Columbia were re-codified, somehow these got left out. And, the court ruled that these laws were still valid. But, consequently, segregation in restaurants, theaters, and other public places disappeared in the District of Columbia.
Thus, justice work is present throughout in the lives of the members. Another example of this is the participation of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church with Jesse Jackson’s Operation PUSH and PUSH Excel which had a branch at Nineteenth Street as discussed by Thelma Groomes. Operation PUSH “was an organization dedicated to improving the economic conditions of black communities across the United States,” and PUSH Excel focused on assisting youth in completing their education and finding jobs. Thus, during the Civil Rights Movement and the following decades, Nineteenth Street Baptist Church continued to be a pillar in society through the actions and leadership of its membership although less as an institution itself.

While less detail was provided, the third main pastor, Rev. Dr. Harkins took an active role in addressing racial justice through his advocacy of criminal justice reform and working towards racial justice more broadly. He also had a significant role in that he could advocate from within the Obama Administration. Like Rev. Dr. Moore, his relationship with a president gave him political and national influence, especially as it relates to topics such as criminal justice reform. While this advocacy role continued under Rev. Dr. Roberts, he also worked to address racial justice in other ways.

One way Rev. Dr. Roberts has worked to address racial justice is through racial reconciliation in Nineteenth Street Baptist Church’s partnership with its mother church, First Baptist Church. First Baptist Church was the white church that the members of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church attended prior to starting their own church. One activity that came out of this partnership was the walk for unity mentioned previously in the section on the culture at NSBC.

138 Interview with Rev. Dr. Harkins.
As it relates to criminal justice, there is a program that writes letters to those who are incarcerated, and Rev. Dr. Roberts states that they also work to assist them in getting legal representations as well.\(^{139}\) In his advocacy of criminal justice reform, Rev. Dr. Roberts has worked to continue the work started by Rev. Dr. Harkins.

One significant organization that works to address racial justice at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church is the Helping Hand Club, and I interviewed the couple who heads the Helping Hand Club to learn more about it. Each year, the Helping Hand Club oversees a Sunday worship service as a means of further educating members on issues of social justice, and more specifically racial justice. The Helping Hand Club encourages members to get involved with the NAACP, and the Helping Hand Club works with organizations such as NAACP, the Legal Defense Fund of the NAACP, and the Association of Life and History among others.\(^{140}\) The Helping Hand Club is not new in that it was founded by Mary E. Cabaniss, another strong woman leader, under Rev. Dr. Moore with the advice of Carter G. Woodson.\(^{141}\) I did not learn of its history or origins until I found a book written in 1948 on the Helping Hand Club. Originally, the Helping Hand Club worked to provide food for the elderly, poor, and sick at holidays such as Christmas and Easter in addition the founding on an “Old People’s Day” where young people would feed the elderly after church and take them home.\(^{142}\) Thus, it is interesting to see how the club has since evolved to focus more specifically on racial justice.

In addition to these material efforts, I also asked Rev. Dr. Roberts of the symbolism in Nineteenth Street Baptist Church displaying a Black Lives Matter sign. He said of the sign, “In

\(^{139}\) Interview with Rev. Dr. Roberts.
\(^{140}\) Interview with Participants 12 and 13.
\(^{141}\) The History of the Helping Hand Club of the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, (Wash., DC: Associated Publishers, Inc., 1948), https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.8b712975.
\(^{142}\) The History of the Helping Hand Club of the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church.
the Spirit of Christ and through our interpretation of the Bible, we believe that black lives matter, and we want people to know we have a space that informs the sacredness of black lives.”

For Rev. Dr. Roberts, this sign is an affirmation of the experiences of black people in society today as it relates to racial profiling and police brutality. It is also a call to action for the city as well as police officers on how we as a community can work together to ensure that black lives do matter. The church’s commitment to black lives is ongoing. There was a clinician that spoke on the mental health impact of black people feeling like their lives do not matter. There are efforts to work with young people in the community and put together a summit with law enforcement to discuss how all parties can work together to create a city and a society in which black people feel like their lives matter. This commitment to black lives matter even extends into the church iconography as the church has agreed to refine the stained-glass window in the atrium area to make it more historically accurate. Thus, Rev. Dr. Roberts has worked to demonstrate Nineteenth Street Baptist Church’s commitment to Black Lives. While there is always room for improvement, Nineteenth Street seems to be on the right path in this regard, as long as all of the planned programs are manifested into action.

The Poor Among Us: How Nineteenth Street Baptist Church Has Addressed Poverty

The role of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in addressing the poor is one that has also changed over time. The church has gone from providing health clinics and early educational opportunities to a Food Pantry and a Homeless Ministry. Hence, it is important to notice the ways in which NSBC has worked for and advocated for the poor throughout the church’s history as well as the gap between charity work and more comprehensive work to address the poor in Washington, DC and in the nation.

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143 Interview with Rev. Dr. Roberts.
144 Interview with Rev. Dr. Roberts.
While there is not much information as it relates to the role of NSBC in addressing the poor under Rev. Dr. Brooks, there is information that notes that the church had a medical clinic to provide health care for those in the community.145 This is significant in that it is one way of caring for the whole person and ensuring that people have access to quality healthcare when they may not have access otherwise as a result of racist healthcare practices and segregation. It is a lack of adequate healthcare that has often contributed to the premature deaths of black people throughout history. Therefore, this is one way in which the Black Church has served as a counter-public and also as a pillar in the community.

Rev. Dr. Harkins continued in working towards providing for those in Washington, DC who lived in poverty. One way in which Rev. Dr. Harkins addressed social justice as it relates to class was in his work on advocating for and providing for the homeless in Washington, DC.146 Additionally, there was a child development center to educate younger children.147 As childcare can often be very expensive, this is one significant way in which Nineteenth Street Baptist Church served as a pillar in the community. Additionally, as it relates to national needs, Rev. Dr. Harkins had trucks brought in and had the church fill the trucks with supplies to be taken to New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.148 Moreover, in his work with the Obama Administration, he worked towards ensuring that everyone had access to healthcare and that those who did not have access were registered through the Affordable Care Act.149 Thus, while there does not appear to have been a health clinic at this time, healthcare was advocated for in other ways. This

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145 Interview with Participant 15.  
146 Interview with Rev. Dr. Harkins.  
147 Interview with Participant 15.  
148 Interview with Participant 4.  
149 Interview with Participant 15.
is one example of the way in which the role of the Black Church in providing for the community can change and evolve over time.

Under Rev. Dr. Roberts, the work of the homeless ministry continues in providing food and clothing for those in need. There are also programs that work to provide for the women’s and men’s shelter. The Food Pantry is also worth noting as a significant organization as it feeds over two hundred people each month. During the government shut down, it fed so many people that it ran out of food, as previously mentioned. In addition to providing food, it also works to connect people with resources that can help them work towards self-sufficient. Nevertheless, the church must go beyond charity in providing food and clothes and must ensure that there are policies and resources in place to help those who are living in poverty get out of poverty and become self-sufficient. They have begun to do some of this work, and it is worth noting that there is a formerly homeless member of the church who credits NSBC with helping him become self-sufficient.

Helping ‘The Least of These’: Other Areas of Social Justice

The work of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church extends beyond solely working towards justice for women, racial justice, and class justice. NSBC strives to address a variety of social justice issues that cover the spectrum of social identities. The church works and has worked to address the elderly, those living with HIV/AIDS, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and members of the immigrant community. In addition to local justice efforts, the global missions ministry is active in building a health clinic in Haiti, although this project is currently on hold as a result of the US State Department travel prohibition, and providing sex education classes for

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150 Interview with Participant 14.  
151 Interviews with Participants 11 and 12.  
152 Interview with Rev. Dr. Roberts.
young people in Nicaragua among other international projects. Thus, the role of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in fighting for social justice extends beyond national borders.

As it relates to providing for the elderly, I was told by Sister Eloise Turner in a conversation of a program that existed under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Moore. Sister Eloise Turner and Dr. Mamie Montague led Solid Gold, a program which provided church based in-home care for the elderly. It became a part of the Home Mission Board of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., and it expanded to seven other churches in Washington, DC, Virginia, New York, Missouri, and New Jersey. In their work, they addressed a need as it related to providing for the elderly in their communities. While Rev. Dr. Moore was cited as one of the lead overseers, it was Sister Turner and Dr. Montague who did the bulk of the work on this project. In addition to Nannie Helen Burroughs and Mary E. Cabaniss of the original Helping Hand Club, this is another example of members taking the reigns as it relates to advocacy. Nevertheless, the program is no longer active.

Another area of marginalization that has been addressed by Nineteenth Street Baptist Church is those living with HIV/AIDS. This is a topic primarily addressed by Rev. Dr. Harkins. As it relates to HIV/AIDS advocacy, Rev. Dr. Harkins stated that “Nineteenth Street Baptist Church was the first to have an on-site testing unit for HIV/AIDS.” In addition to testing, Nineteenth Street worked to ensure that those tested were provided with additional health services as well. This is one way in which Nineteenth Street Baptist Church has addressed a need that has arisen in the community. As it relates to addressing HIV/AIDS, NSBC served as a counter-public and a pillar in the community through providing these resources.

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153 Interview with Rev. Dr. Roberts.
154 Ethnographic notes, March 31, 2019.
155 Interview with Rev. Dr. Harkins.
156 Interview with Rev. Dr. Harkins.
Moreover, under the leadership of the two most recent pastors, Nineteenth Street Baptist Church has worked to make the church more welcoming of members of the LGBTQ+ community. Rev. Dr. Harkins advocated for the LGBTQ+ community as pastor and stated that it is a conversation that is ongoing within the church. Like Rev. Dr. Harkins, Rev. Dr. Roberts works to make Nineteenth Street a place that is welcoming to our “LGBTQ brothers and sisters.” Additionally, Participant 19 says of this in his interview that “The church itself has become more liberal in a sense as African Americans are not very fond of the LGBTQ community. I would say Christian African Americans, Baptist, all denominations are not fond of it. The pastor here has been good to include everyone in the church and make sure the church isn’t exclusive to a certain part…The old heads don’t really understand it. The young people understand it a little bit more. It just depends on how they were raised.” This is significant in that it comes from one of the younger members interviewed. Nevertheless, it is difficult to decipher what this means in practice as there is a difference between welcoming and affirming. It is also important to note that I do not know if any members of NSBC are members of the LGBTQ+ community.

A new cause the church has recently taken on under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Roberts is immigration reform. The church is active in advocating for a pathway to citizenship as well as in partnering the DMV Congregation Network, an immigrant advocacy organization. As mentioned previously, while the church is not housing immigrants, the group is free to hold meetings at the church. The Deacon who oversees the partnership with the DMV

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157 Interview with Rev. Dr. Harkins.
158 Interview with Rev. Dr. Roberts.
159 Interview with Participant 19.
160 Interview with Rev. Dr. Roberts.
161 Church business meeting, January 18, 2019.
Congregation Network emphasized that it is about racial justice in addition to immigrants’ rights as it primarily impacts people of color.\textsuperscript{162} Yet, one cannot help but wonder what it is that is preventing the church from declaring itself a sanctuary church where immigrants can be housed. Is it the politics that some members warn of in the last section of this chapter?

**Being a Light: Social Justice in the Personal Lives of the Members**

In addition to the work of the church as an institution, there were trends in how social justice has been evident in the lives of current members. There were six people, seven including the woman who served as a source of oral history on Nannie Helen Burroughs, who have been involved in education in some capacity whether it be as a teacher, professor, administrator, or someone connected to a university. They have served in public schools and in parochial schools, at historically black colleges and universities and at predominantly white institutions. In discussing her role as an educator, Participant 5 discusses the freedom offered through education, especially given our history of slavery.\textsuperscript{163} The number of members of the church who are educators is very significant.

Moreover, I interviewed four ministers, and there were four people who had connections to the NAACP. The NAACP was offered as a major way to do social justice work in one’s life. It is also worth noting that two people mentioned that their activities were limited because of jobs with high security clearance within the government. In addition to these trends, many members work within the nonprofit sector. They work for organizations like Goodwill of Greater Washington and the Washington Area Community Investment Fund (Wacif). Another member has worked in juvenile detention centers, with women on food stamps, and with the homeless.\textsuperscript{164}

\textsuperscript{162} Interview with Participant 10.
\textsuperscript{163} Interview with Participant 5.
\textsuperscript{164} Interview with Participant 11.
There are many members who are involved in community advocacy and community
development work as well. One of the members has worked as a social worker and done justice
work through that avenue. Additionally, there was often mention of justice work and activism
done while in college and middle school. For the members of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church,
justice work is not new. It is work they have been doing for years and work that has become a
part of who they are through their respective professions and a part of who they are as Christians
in the body of Christ.

**Areas of Improvement and Barriers to Social Justice at Nineteenth Street Today**

When asked the question about areas of improvement and barriers to social justice at
Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, many hesitated to respond. They did not want to speak as what
they perceived as poorly about their church, and that is understandable. Nevertheless, it is
important to be critical and identify areas of growth. It is only in identifying areas of growth that
Nineteenth Street can work towards making itself more welcoming and more effective as it
relates to social justice.

One theme that emerged in this question is what community looks like at Nineteenth
Street Baptist Church. As displayed by the trends in income, Nineteenth Street is a church where
many members are from the upper middle and upper socioeconomic classes. One member
referred to it as a church of the “bourgeoisie.”[^20] What does that mean for the black community
at large? Rather than serve as a “beacon of hope” for all people, it seems that ‘the least of these’
are not present in the congregation at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church.[^1] There is a need for
more diversity, such as class diversity, at the church. This will require the church taking an

[^20]: Interview with Participant 20.
[^1]: Interview with Participant 1.
active role in going out into the community and ministering to people. The work the church is doing is great, but is it resulting in relationships between people of different classes? While the church strives to be a place where all feel welcome and believes it is a place where all feel welcome, do people of certain economic backgrounds feel welcome in the church? Participant 1 discusses this when she says “I feel almost like it’s just another place where someone needs a check and you need to, you know, have social activities and you can choose to participate in those social activities and maybe you don’t but it doesn’t always feel like an inspiring, spiritual, Jesus-filled place, the kind that doesn’t necessarily have diamonds and pearls hanging from the ceiling but the place where you get what you need, spiritually, emotionally, and that you feel that you are the beacon for the community, not just people who are in your income bracket or people who are educated the same way you are but for the least of these.”167 While Participant 1 seemed to be the only one who expressed it this way, others addressed the class concern as well, although more mildly, in that they mentioned that there are few single mothers and homeless people who attend outside of certain seasons like Easter and Christmas.168 One member mentioned that it could be that “they don’t want that many members,” and yet she says, “You don’t want the church to survive if you don’t want them to come in.”169 Thus, this class issue is a matter of life and death for the church.

In addition to economic differences, there are age differences at play as well. The church is working on developing its youth ministry and has hired a youth minister for this task. I would estimate that there are roughly between twelve and fifteen youth who regularly attend church.170 The focus thus far seems to be youth, and there are very few young adults at Nineteenth Street

167 Interview with Participant 1.
168 Interview with Participants 16 and 20.
169 Interview with Participant 20.
170 2018 Member Directory distributed on April 14, 2019.
Baptist Church. Thus, this is another area of improvement. There are young people who are gaining influence in the church, such as the two new deacons, who both appear to be in their forties, but one must question how much of a voice they have.\textsuperscript{171} Are their voices and views valued or is it only those with seniority whose voices are prioritized?\textsuperscript{172} This is even true of the voice of Rev. Dr. Darryl Roberts who is younger than many members at NSBC. If young people’s voices are not entered the conversation, then it will be impossible for the church to grow and maintain itself. As the congregation ages, sustainability must be central to the conversation. Older people “don’t have the strength to participate” and young people “don’t see it as an active church.”\textsuperscript{173} This will also address another area of improvement cited as it relates to social justice work being limited because of the limited number of active members. Furthermore, this highlights the need for “different avenues as society changes.”\textsuperscript{174} There will need to be an increased role of technology and social media in aiding and sustaining the growth of the church and in developing a stronger, more diverse, justice-oriented community, which I’ll discuss more in the conclusion.

Another key theme related to politics. Politics was cited as a barrier as the church may fear being too political. Rev. Dr. Harkins mentioned that some may have thought he was “too political.”\textsuperscript{175} I’ve heard one member mention that Rev. Dr. Roberts is too political as well.\textsuperscript{176} Those interviewed discussed that the church must not be afraid to be too political. The church has a responsibility to take a stand and speak truth to power. It must risk being labeled too

\textsuperscript{171} Interview with Participant 9.  
\textsuperscript{172} Interview with Participant 16.  
\textsuperscript{173} Interview with Participant 20.  
\textsuperscript{174} Interview with Participant 5.  
\textsuperscript{175} Interview with Rev. Dr. Harkins.  
\textsuperscript{176} Ethnographic notes, January 20, 2019.
political to do the real justice work that must be done. Based on the interviews, I can infer that there are few members who perceive that NSBC is currently too political.

In discussing social justice, there was a concern with there not being a comprehensive or umbrella social justice program. The church does a lot, and maybe it needs to focus more of its energies. Rev. Dr. Roberts discussed that the church will need to decide what areas of social justice are most significant for the church. Still, there were members who had suggestions as to areas the church should address. It was stated that the church should do more with criminal justice reform. It was also stated that they should advocate more for a quality education for all and work to address the school to prison pipeline. Both Rev. Dr. Harkins and Rev. Dr. Roberts discussed the importance of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church being more welcoming to members of the LGBTQ+ community. These are the key areas where members felt the church should do more.

Another concern as it relates to addressing social justice was the budget. Nineteenth Street Baptist Church must work on better managing its budget, especially as it relates to social justice work. There may be various projects that the church would like to take on; however, they must be conscious of the budgetary constraints. Also related to money is the benevolence fund. The church takes up an offering for the benevolence fund once a month. The money for the fund goes to those in need. One concern was ensuring that the benevolence fund provides those in need with an adequate amount of money. For example, if they need assistance paying rent, ensure that the amount they are given is enough to pay rent rather than $50 or $100 as discussed

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177 Interviews with Participants 1, 5, 6, 11 and 19.
178 Interview with Rev. Dr. Roberts.
179 Interview with Participant 15.
180 Interview with Participant 16.
181 Interview with Rev. Dr. Roberts.
182 Interview with Participant 1.
by Participant 1. In addressing the needs of the community, Nineteenth Street must be conscious of its limited resources.

Other barriers included denominationalism, lack of political representation, and a lack of awareness. As it relates to denominationalism, there needs to be more unity among denominations and churches. There may be churches who have similar projects that they could partner on to be more effective; however, the churches may not partner with each other because of their differing denominations.183 Regarding a lack of political representation, the District Columbia is not a state, and that is a barrier to some of the social justice work that could be taking place. Nevertheless, Nineteenth Street Baptist Church can advocate through their delegate, Eleanor Holmes Norton.184 Lastly, they must continually work to increase awareness of social justice issues, especially among the youth as they are the future leaders.185 This feedback is significant in better understanding how NSBC can proceed going forward in addressing social justice.

Summary

In the final chapter of this thesis, I examined the ways in which Nineteenth Street Baptist Church as an institution has addressed social justice, the ways the members have addressed social justice, and areas of improvement. It is through examining the ways NSBC has addressed social justice that we can come into a deeper understanding of what it means for a Black Church to be a pillar of the community and the ways in which NSBC has served as a counter-public. While Nineteenth Street Baptist Church has served as a counter-public in elevating the social justice needs of the community, it’s role as a pillar has changed and evolved. This could be

183 Interview with Participant 11.
184 Interview with Participant 11.
185 Interviews with Participants 12 and 13.
because other organizations and agencies are providing services that the church once had to provide, yet we must continue to push the church to move beyond charity work in advocating for change. In my conclusion, I will examine this further as I work to define what social justice work in the Black Church ideally looks like today.
Conclusion

From Progressive to Radical: Moving Beyond Charity

While there are many progressive black churches of which Nineteenth Street Baptist Church is one, there are few radical churches. A progressive church addresses social justice in some areas; however, it focuses primarily on charity work. Charity work treats a symptom, but it fails to address the root of the problem. A radical church, in contrast, would strive to address the roots of social injustices present in society today and work towards cura personalis or care of the whole person in ensuring that people are provided with everything that they need. This comes first through relationship and then through action. It is only through relationships with those who are marginalized that we come to understand the needs of the various marginalized communities. As members of a community and as allies, it is up to a church that desires to be radical to ask of the oppressed and marginalized what they as a church can do to best address the injustice whether it be with education reform, criminal justice reform, or other areas. As the Black Church has historically served as a pillar of the community and consist of those who are racially marginalized and oppressed, it is in a unique position in that it could foster these relationships amongst privileged and oppressed community members. Nevertheless, this may require that the members of the church go beyond the four walls of the church and into the community.

Furthermore, as it relates to acting, the Black Church must ensure that all a community’s needs are met and that the community is provided with all that it needs to not only survive but thrive. This will vary by community based on the social services that are currently provided by government agencies and nonprofits. It is also worth noting that the Black Church can establish partnerships and connections to assist government agencies and nonprofits in providing social services. As it relates to needs, people need access to quality healthcare, access to quality
education, economic justice, environmental justice, and legal justice, and the Black Church can play a role in ensuring that the needs of people are met. It is important to note that the ways in which a church can act will be limited by the budget they have allocated to social justice work and community programming.

First, a community needs access to affordable healthcare. This can come through ensuring that people are signed up for the Affordable Care Act and have health insurance or through a church hosting a health clinic. While access to healthcare has increased, it could still be helpful for a church to host specific health clinics in a community. Some health clinics that a church could host would be a mammogram clinic, a dental clinic, a vision clinic, or a mental health clinic. As mental health has historically been a source of stigma for black people, it is especially important that the church address mental health. This could look like a partnership with local counselors or even work to create healing circles and healing workshops within the church. This is one way a church can build relationships with those in the community beyond its own church members. Rev. Dr. Harkins has exemplified a health clinic done well in not only hosting HIV/AIDS clinics but ensuring that people were provided with additional resources as well. Thus, there is an example in the history of Nineteenth Street. Additionally, as some neighborhoods are rapidly gentrifying, it may require the church utilizing a space located closer to or within the community it serves.

Another area that the Black Church can take a more active role in is ensuring all students have access to a quality education, as discussed by one of the participants. How does the church work against the school-to-prison pipeline? Advocacy and lobbying is one way the

186 Dr. Gloria Wilder presentation in Father Kemp’s Struggle & Transcendence class, April 12, 2019.
187 Interview with Participant 16.
church can work towards a quality education and an end to the school-to-prison pipeline. Additionally, a church can have a child development center, similar to the one that once functioned at Nineteenth Street. A church can develop a mentorship program or partner with other organizations in which members mentor public school students and ensure that they have the knowledge they need to be successful. In addition to mentorship, a church can also help tutor students. Additionally, they can partner with schools and other educational institutions to ensure that those working with marginalized communities are culturally competent through hosting diversity and leadership training sessions. A church can provide pre-school resources and ensure that students are reading over the summer through hosting summer camps or even after school programs to help close the education gap that tends to widen as children progress within the education system. Working on education could be as simple as ensuring that teachers have the supplies they need for the classroom. It could also look like advocating for teachers to have higher salaries to ensure that the school district can attract and afford the best teachers. It is worth noting that education is not an area that Nineteenth Street has historically worked to address, outside of the child development center, although many of the members are educators themselves. Nevertheless, there is important justice work done in the education system through the members who are educators.

While Nineteenth Street Baptist Church works to provide clothes and food to those in need, it could do more to ensure that the members have jobs that would allow them to provide for themselves. In my interviews, I learned little of efforts being made to help those who are homeless and living in poverty, besides volunteering at the shelters and providing food through the Food Pantry. Therefore, I will suggest other ways a church could work towards economic justice. The church could seek partnerships with organizations that focus on economic
empowerment. It could have community workshops on topics from searching for jobs to creating a resume or CV. Nineteenth Street just began having financial literacy classes, and these are also important in working towards economic justice. Additionally, a church could host career fairs for the community to connect people with local organizations and businesses that may be hiring. It is typically a matter of ensuring that people have access to resources and networking opportunities. As it relates to the link to criminal justice reform, it is also important to ensure that the formerly incarcerated find jobs as well. While the church can provide food and clothing in the short-term, it can work towards a long-term goal of self-sufficiency. It is worth noting that Nineteenth Street states that they provide resources for self-sufficiency; however, I have not learned of what those resources are.188

Also related to economic justice, while there is a homeless ministry, it is important to also address the affordable housing need within the community. In many cities, including Washington, DC, gentrification has led to an increased need for affordable housing. In the same way that NSBC historically worked to ensure that there was housing for the elderly, it can work today to develop affordable housing and to advocate for affordable housing. Beyond providing for the homeless, it is important to provide them with the resources needed to find a home whether that be a job or connecting them with an organization that works to help people find affordable housing. Furthermore, advocacy is important in continuing to ensure that those who need affordable housing and are promised affordable housing are provided with quality housing. For those who are homeless, a church could partner with an organization like Room in the Inn to

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188 Interview with Rev. Dr. Roberts.
house the homeless when the shelters are at capacity. It is important to recognize that this work will be ongoing as gentrification continues and people are displaced.

The other areas of justice are environmental justice and legal justice. While legal justice was mentioned by a few members, environmental justice was not mentioned in any of the twenty interviews I conducted. Yet, environmental justice is important, and it is often related to other areas such as class justice and racial justice. As stewardship of money is important in a church, stewardship of resources should also be important. At minimum, a church should be recycling, and it could also do composting. Additionally, depending on land availability, it could also partner to start a community garden to ensure that people have access to healthy foods, especially those who live in food desserts. A church can inform people of climate concerns and encourage members to live sustainable lives. Once again, advocacy is also useful.

Lastly, a church must advocate and work towards legal justice. One way in which Nineteenth Street has addressed this is in its advocacy of criminal justice reform. As it relates to developing personal relationships, letter writing and visiting is important. While they may not target the larger system, they can positively impact the lives of those who are incarcerated. In addition to these, a church can also assist in getting quality counsel for those who are incarcerated and also those in landlord tenant courts. Rev. Dr. Roberts mentioned that Nineteenth Street Baptist Church is currently working on this.189 While advocating for criminal justice reform, a church can do what it can to fight for equal treatment for all within the legal system and provide people with the best opportunity at a fair trial.

189 Interview with Rev. Dr. Roberts.
In writing this paper and reflecting on what the role of the Black Church is in addressing social justice, I was often asked of my perspective. While these are not all of the ways a church can address social justice, these are a few starting points. In a few interviews, the members mentioned that the church should speak up for people and provide for their needs, thus advocacy and charity work is important. Nevertheless, it is always important to look at the long-term in addition to the short-term as the ultimate goal is justice for all. To do real justice, one must change the system or supplement the system, and that is what many of the suggestions here do.

**The Black Church: The Next Generation**

Beyond my view on the role of the Black Church in addressing social justice, I was also asked what this research meant to me as a millennial within the Black Church. In my observations, there are few millennials remaining in the Black Church as I have defined it. It is important to address why they left and what it will take to bring them back. My research is limited as it relates to millennials, and this is an area of growing research. Yet, I would say that many millennials have left the Black Church as a result of traditional mindsets and practices that can often be tied to injustice. The Church has often been described as hypocritical and judgmental, and millennials have not always felt welcome in the space. The Black Church has not only silenced women’s voices, but it has worked to police women’s bodies in dictating what they can wear as well as what they can do with their bodies. In some churches, women are still not allowed to preach in the pulpit. Additionally, some churches have strict explicit and implicit dress codes. Strict dress codes not only impact millennials but they can make those of lower socioeconomic classes feel unwelcome. In addition to women, members of the LGBTQ+ community have also been excluded and made to feel that they are not welcome. This is one area Nineteenth Street Baptist Church is working on. It is important to note that this is not only true of
the Black Church but the Church as a larger institution. Yet, Nineteenth Street Baptist Church is a church that has reckoned with its past and is working to develop as a church where all people feel welcomed and valued. Furthermore, NSBC addresses injustices that arise in society, such as police brutality, in a way that other churches do not as they may fear being too political.

Although Nineteenth Street appears to provide the space that millennials desire, there are few millennials in the church. In contrast, there are churches like Alfred Street Baptist Church that have growing populations of millennials. It would be worth completing research on Alfred Street Baptist Church and analyzing the ways it differs from Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. While I have not conducted research, I can recognize the significance of technology, programming, and a more contemporary service. As millennials are constantly using technology, it is important for a church to have an active online presence as well as an active social media presence. This is an area that Nineteenth Street is growing in as they now livestream the services on YouTube. As it relates to programming, there is not yet young adult and millennial programming at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church as they are in the process of developing the youth ministry. Thus, there is no current space at the church for young adults to meet and discuss topics that are relevant to them or develop relationships with other young adults. Some young adults may leave for churches that have programming that targets them. As it relates to services, the service and presentation is more traditional. While I recognize the importance of tradition, there are some changes that could be made to make the service more inviting. It would be helpful to have song lyrics accessible in the bulletin or on a screen so that people can sing along. Additionally, the church could introduce new songs beyond the traditional gospel songs that black churches have been singing for the past few decades. These are minor changes that could make the service more inviting while acknowledging the preferences of older people in a church.
who tend to be more traditional and resistant to change. Therefore, the Black Church must not
only be open to hearing the voices of millennials but must also be willing to take their
suggestions as it relates to making the Black Church more welcoming and inviting.

**Lessons for the Twenty-First Century Church**

While much of this research has centered in the Black Church, there are lessons that
could be expanded to white churches, multicultural churches, and the twenty-first century
Church at large. Given its history and its role as a pillar in the black community and as a counter-
public, the Black Church has a specific responsibility as it relates to addressing racial justice and
social justice more broadly. Other churches differ in that they developed in different social and
political contexts and may vary in purpose. While not all churches feel called to speak truth to
power through the prophetic voice, there are ways in which churches can address the injustices
present in society that go beyond prayer. This is important because many black members have
left white and multicultural churches as a result of their failure to address injustices present in
society and specifically in the lives of their members, as I discussed previously.\(^\text{190}\) Furthermore,
some churches have bought into the myth of the ‘post-racial’ society or implied that Christians
should be colorblind, and both of these fail to take into account the vastness of God’s creation
and the imago dei or the ways in which all people are created in the image of God. While
churches may differ in politics and perspective on the role of the Church in public life, all
churches acknowledge the importance of Jesus and the Bible. Thus, the Bible can be a source of
inspiration and change.

\(^{190}\) Robertson, “A Quiet Exodus.”
One lesson the Church can learn from Nineteenth Street Baptist Church regards the ways in which they read the Bible. When the Bible is read with an acknowledgement of its political, social, and historical history, there are justice themes that develop throughout in stories such as The Good Samaritan and in the life of Jesus. It is important to acknowledge that everyone reads the Bible through a personal lens inspired by their life experiences. When that lens is a privileged identity, it is difficult to see the needs of the marginalized communities addressed in the Bible and the ways in which power is addressed and challenged in the Bible. It is important that the Church learn to see the Bible in new ways, especially from those whose personal lens differ from their own. It is in reading the Bible that we as Christians learn how to live. The Bible teaches us how to treat our neighbor, how to treat the stranger, how to treat the poor, and how to treat other marginalized and oppressed people. As the Church claims the Bible as its guides, it must understand the ways in which the Bible reflects and addresses some injustices in society today. Thus, similar to the ways in which Nineteenth Street Baptist Church understands the Bible’s call to social justice, the Church can gain a deeper understanding of justice in the Bible.

Another lesson from the Black Church regards acknowledging and listening to marginalized and oppressed voices within the Church. Similar to the ways in which Nineteenth Street has worked towards the elevation of women’s voices and being more welcoming of members of the LGBTQ+ community, the Church can work towards acknowledging the marginal voices within itself. In white churches and some multicultural churches, that may require them to listen to the voices of black people and their needs within the religious space. As the religious space is often considered a sacred space, people expect to have their experiences affirmed and to feel like their lives and experiences matter to their church in addition to God. Listening to these voices may make one uncomfortable, but it can also assist in sustaining a
church. Furthermore, the Church may be required to go beyond listening to voices into incorporating members of marginalized communities into leadership. The diversity of a church is not within the congregation but within the leadership. If a church wants to be diverse as it relates to class, they should ensure that members of lower socioeconomic classes are given a seat at the table. This is true of other areas such as race, age, and gender as well. Similar to the parable of the rich man and the table, the Church can do more as it relates to welcoming all people to the table.

**Final Thoughts**

In conducting this research, I learned of the ways in which one progressive black church is fighting for social justice. Although there are areas that could be improved upon, Nineteenth Street Baptist Church has done and is continuing to do important justice work within Washington, DC, although the work they do may not be as visible as participating in protests. Furthermore, their justice work extends beyond the church and into the personal lives of the members as well. Nineteenth Street Baptist Church is not the only progressive black church, and yet there are some churches that do not address social justice at all. As the Black Church is not monolithic it is difficult to describe its approach to social justice activism; however, this research gives us a glimpse into the work completed by progressive black Baptist churches in society today. To return to Glaude’s question: Is the Black Church Dead? My research seems to reveal that the Black Church is still alive and still fighting for social justice in response to the prophetic voice.
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Appendix

Image 1: This is the Black Lives Matter sign located at the front of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church.
Image 2: This is the front of the building depicting the two quotes and the church name.

Images 3 & 4: This is a picture of the cove and a close-up picture of the image of Jesus that is to be edited to make it more historically accurate.
Image 5: This is the bulletin board in the Fellowship Hall providing a glance of the history.

![Image of bulletin board](image5)

Image 6: This is a picture inside of the small chapel.

![Image of chapel](image6)

Image 7: This is a picture of the inside of the sanctuary.

![Image of sanctuary](image7)