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Abstract

The Influence of the Traditional African American Protestant Church in African American Women Leadership

The traditional African American Protestant church held a primary influence in the lives of African American women leaders and was a basis of the cultural and social context that set the stage for the development of a consciousness of an empowerment style of leadership. Although other organizations, clubs or professional groups inspired aspects of the leadership development of socially oriented African American women leaders, research from a dissertation study *African American Women Leadership in its Social and Cultural Background: A Multiple Case Study* (Meux, 2002), unveiled that the traditional church was a primary filter of talents, self-identification, community understanding, opportunities to gain leadership type skills, and public exposure during the formative years of the women leaders. This influence was evident in current leadership practices, even in the women who were not currently active in a church community. Exploratory research was conducted with six African American women leaders to better understand the influence of the church in the development of their consciousness towards an empowerment style of leadership. It was found that the early church experiences influenced a strong and varied sense of faith integration in their leadership activities. This paper presented specific findings that highlighted this integration and style of empowerment leadership.

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Introduction

This paper will share some insight on Christianity, faith integration, and the role of the traditional African American church in the development of leadership in African American women. The information is based on findings from my dissertation research on *African American Women's Leadership in the Context of its Social and Cultural Background: A Multiple Case Study* (Meux, 2002).

The paper will present portions of the findings that show how early exposure to and participation in one of the traditional Protestant African American churches helped to influence and shape an empowerment style of leadership in African American women.

The Traditional Protestant African American Church

The traditional Protestant African American church was the bridge from African culture to the African American culture during the years of American slavery. When the necessary freedom was granted for spiritual gatherings, church gatherings provided relief from the consistent horror of slave conditions, provided time to participate in religious or

spiritual activities, or time to plan escapes. Racism within church organizations during this era forced African American people to become totally separated from the White church organizations. This was a primary reason for the creation and proliferation of the African American church.

Starting around 1750, the seven mainline African American denominations were created. These were African Methodist Episcopal (AME), Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME), Baptist, Pentecostal, Holiness, Spiritualist, and AME Zion. Today, these churches have 80% of the religious affiliation of African American Christians (Lincoln & Mimaya, 1990).

These churches were the primary social organization that could be totally owned, operated and supported by African Americans. Within the churches, a philosophy of empowerment of the group was emphasized as a dominant concept (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990) and they became primary sources of independence, and of social, political and economic support for the members (Wilmore, 1996, Paris, 1985, Frazier, 1963).

The new and evolving Black church in America provided a place where African American people served as leaders, had a form of hierarchy, organized their social existence, and became the nation within the nation for the African person who had to rebuild life, family and community in a foreign land (Wilmore, 1996).

The Church and Leadership Development

Exploratory research was conducted to gain an understanding of the role and influence of the traditional African American Protestant church in the development of a consciousness of leadership behavior in African American women.

Multiple case study methodology with six African American women leaders in diverse leadership capacities was conducted using data generated through narrative interviews, observations and document reviews. The theoretical perspective was a comprehensive theory of empowerment (Collins, 1999, 2000; Rappaport, 1994) while womanism (Walker, 1983), which embodies a distinctly African American epistemology, provided the conceptual framework.

Out of the six research participants, one was Holiness, one was CME and four were affiliated with an African American Baptist denomination. Four were leaders in education; two in higher education at the university level, and two at the elementary or secondary school levels. One was the CEO of a nationally recognized non-profit organization. One of the participants held the position of church mother, a position that is distinctive to the traditional African American church (Meux, 2002, p.126-127). She was also formally a leader in retail sales.

From the multiple findings in the research, this paper focused on those aspects that showed a relationship to faith and spirituality that influenced the development of a leadership consciousness and behavior in the sample group of leaders. Quotes represent verbatim responses of the research participants and were taken from the dissertation study (Meux, 2002). The initials after each quote represent the pseudonym given to each participant in order to assure her confidentiality.

Research Findings

In the early stages of life, church going was a part of the women's socialization to life and community, and it formed a part of their strong cultural foundation. Family members, including extended family, were the catalyst for

getting the young women to church, and they provided strong role modeling of church participation (Meux, pp. 116–118).

Church was intertwined with almost all activities of the women as youth. It was at church that many of their inherent talents were identified and developed. They were encouraged to develop skills in relating the traditions of the culture in both written and oral formats, and were provided a forum to perform in front of congregations. They developed skills in memorization, dramatization and the understanding of how to influence an audience. They were also expected to participate alongside adults in various auxiliaries or activities (Meux, 2002, pp.118-122).

In prior research, mentoring was found to be an important concept to move African American women to leadership (Montgomery, 1995). This was particularly important as research and practical experience indicated that African American women were rarely mentored for leadership positions in the workplace (Russell & Wright, 1992; Greenhaus, Parasuraman and Wormley, 1990). The experiences of the women in the study affirmed the role of the church in developing a community of sisterhood where the elder women mentored the younger women.

“There were some women (in the church) who had adopted me although I had my parents. A lot of people don’t think that what one does or not really affects who you are but it does. I worked with these old women (in the church) --- matriarchs meetings because I could do stuff. They let me do projects. They enjoyed me” (MMB, narrative field notes, p. 123).

“A Sister (woman) from the church I attended as a youth took particular notice of me. She said, little girl you are so cute but you have a mouth, we have got to work on that mouth. And then she spent time with me. And I don’t remember her name this day, but I remember her presence and not being, providing a guidance without being judgmental. And that was an important value.” (SC, narrative notes, p.124).

“I was put with this lady who had been in the church ever since she was a child. And this woman was about; she was about 10 or 15 years older than me. And she would sit down and tell me stuff that happened forever. And all about things that God had done for her and when it’s a living witness like that, and you say ‘Oh yeah, did He really do that?’ And she said, ‘Yeah, and He can do the same thing for you,’ that type of thing” (NHB, narrative notes, p.124-125).

Training for social change activities was also introduced and developed in the church. The participants were impressed with the ability of church members to organize people from diverse walks of the community into a political force. Skills of organizing and community activism were developed and nurtured as much in modern times as they had been in the historical traditional African American church (Bennett, 1975; Lincoln & Mimaya, 1997; Evans, 1995).

“There were also lessons about where certain kinds of leaders developed --- things that could be done in and through the church that couldn’t be done elsewhere. Where people explored. Where how do we deal with these certain injustices? I was very much aware that those things got discussed and happened in the church, and so there was an inner connection to me to both the spiritual and social side, that I saw adults all around me practice on a regular basis. So, there’s a complexity to the role of the church in its social and hierarchical role” (SC, narrative notes, p.128).

Another way leadership was developed was through the exposure to African American history and culture. Positive African American history was rarely taught in schools and most African American people learned aspects of it exclusively through the church. Understanding one’s history and its heroes in all of its manifestations, was an imperative psychological concept that grounded African American people in a sense of place in the world. It also provided role models or cultural mentors to emulate, and an understanding of how spirituality and faith were intertwined with African American people and their culture.

“You can’t explain history. There is no history of Black people outside the church and what it’s all about; Nat Turner, minister, Dr. King, Jr., Mary McClead Bethune. And see this is one thing that when we tell our history there is no history outside the Word of God and the church. And the church is believers. It’s not a building, its the believers” (ST, narrative notes, p.129).

Spirituality, religion and support of the church in promoting leadership pursuits and success emerged as key factors for African American women in several separate studies (Gostnell, 1996; McKenzie, 1996; Ramsey, 1998; Simmons, 1997; Webb, 2000). The research participants also spoke of their continuing dependency on God, Jesus Christ or their spirituality, in their leadership activities.

“I mean I don’t necessarily think that I choose this (leadership) for myself. Some of the thing’s that have happened to me, I don’t necessarily think I choose it. I think God, He opened the door. Sometimes I went through it kicking and screaming but I think it was His purposes and I think it was --- I think His purpose was to glorify Himself, because most people want to know how did I do it? And it wasn’t me” (MMB, narrative notes, p.165).

Another participant spoke about receiving directions for leadership from the Lord in her sleep stating that “the Lord talks to me a lot through visions, and He gives credence to it through the word” (ST, narrative notes, p. 165).

In the historic African American church, women who would not be considered for leadership in the community or workplace were still selected to leadership positions in the church (Harley, 1982, in Collins, 1990, p. 153). This helped women to frame valuable skills and talents that were later used in leadership activities outside of the church and in all segments of the broader society.

Several of the participants expressed surprise at how many activities, skills, talents, and relationships were developed through their early church experiences. They also spoke of how spiritual experiences and the integration of their faith were inseparable from their regular daily activities and leadership activities.

“Yeah, and now that you’re saying that I hadn’t even associated that with me being a speaker or going up in front. But the church did basically, from the beginning I guess with my speeches. Oh yeah, I hadn’t even thought of that either --- memorizing, songs and speeches. As a matter of fact I even wrote speeches” (FLH, narrative notes, p. 121).

“I’ve always done leadership and it was nurtured in the church. You know it was positively without a question, and by my parents and my personhood was nurtured by my parents and the extended community” (MA, narrative notes, p. 121).

Faith Integration in Leadership Style

African American women leaders showed an integration of the Christian faith in their leadership style that was strong, diverse, and representative of many areas of Christian teachings. Early church encounters were also pivotal influences in developing a consciousness of leadership that was profoundly focused on the empowerment of followers.

The women continued to show the influence of the church in their lives as they matured into leadership positions. This leadership showed a deep understanding of Christian virtues that were expressed to be inseparable from daily life activities and that the church developed skills that were used in community service.

I was very active in my church (as a youth). Yes, that’s a part of how I developed a lot of skills to do what I have done through community service” (MMB, narrative notes, p. 79).

It was also expressed that there was little separation between church and school for one participant, and that the principal of her school was also the church Pastor. Therefore school was just an extension of church where children read the Bible and learned to pray together (ST, narrative notes, p.79).

An understanding that the Christian faith served as the foundation for all adult behavior and activity led the participants to perform leadership in a way that showed a strong integration of faith.

“You see, I brought a determination when I came to California that I must do something for my people or else I’m not a Christian. So I’m bringing in the spiritual modality, the physical modality, the psychological modality, and the emotional modalities” (ST, narrative notes, p.146).

Seeking direction from God before acting out in a leadership capacity was particularly relevant, as the women had not received any other formal leadership training outside of the church arena. Therefore, many lessons gained in church experiences and church leadership opportunities were translated to leadership in the workplace, community or organizations. Listening to God for direction continued the understanding of how Christians were to function at all levels that had been expressed from earlier years in the participants lives. One participant said her pregnancy brought her back to a close relationship with God as she sought to learn how to raise her child (MMB, narrative notes, p. 160). Another participant stated that she also sought to lead others as she felt Jesus would do in each situation.

“I believe one leads by example. That’s how Jesus always did things. What I always try to do is to do things excellently or strive to do excellent. That’s what my staff will do, try to reach excellence” (MMB, narrative notes, p.150).

“My style is motivation, for people to achieve their goodness without being always told. But its always in conjunction with what would Jesus do in that situation? I never make decisions in conjunction with what I like, and I’m going to do it in spite of. I make a suggestion the way the Lord gives it to me I feel” (ST, narrative notes, p. 166-167).

Another participant stated that she listened through intense conversations and watched people express their strengths. She then waited “to see if they have performed

what my spirit tells me they're good at. Then I invite them to participate with me in things" (MA, narrative notes, p.176)

Two of the participants mentioned the age of Christ as a consideration for when leadership could be carried out successfully. One pointed to the "age of accountability being 30, because of Jesus" (ST, narrative notes, p.175). Another stated that children could be called to leadership, also by the pattern of Christ.

"I mean Jesus himself was 12 wasn't he? So children; He's calling children. It says he will call the rocks if we don't do it" (NHB, narrative notes, p. 176).

Having integrity and being honest about stating a perceived wrong were important characteristics of the women's leadership. One participant stated that as a leader "You have to have that integrity that when you say something you shall do it" (ST, narrative notes, p.149). Another told how she reacted, even as a child, when she saw a problem.

"I was always a person that no matter what, if I believed something, I was going to speak to it, and I did, whatever the consequences were. Even as a young girl I had to say it, I had to say it, I had to say it!" (FLH, narrative notes, p.149).

There were certain identifiable characteristics in the leadership style of the research participants that adhered strongly to faith integration principles. Again, these characteristics were informed through church related activities and exposures in formative years. The responses showed a close relationship to what the women had witnessed or experienced in their childhood years through role models or mentors in the church. These primary characteristics centered around being accountable to Christ for their actions, being respectful of all persons including the downtrodden or unloved, and having the ability to engender trust in people who were not normally trusting. They also showed a unique ability to understand how to look past surface qualities of others in judging their abilities as followers.

One participant felt accountable to God to “see each other for who we are, as the male and the female persona of God” because “as long as we’re here on this earth, as long as we have breathe, that our missions are not over” (FLH, narrative notes, p. 165). Another stated her belief that what the woman leader did was between the woman and God.

“Everything you get, you get from God. You get your direct orders from God. I think God is the only person you are trying to please or not. And if you think you’re not, you’d better get it together and please God” (NHB, narratives notes, p.152).

Another participant stated, “until the dirt’s over your face, we have the opportunity to change our lives, to turn this thing around and make a contribution” (SC, narrative notes, p.151).

The women had come from diverse economic and social conditions and showed a sense of understanding for people who would normally not be included in leadership organizational activities. This characteristic was also nurtured through family and community relationships where being with diverse strata of people would be commonplace (Meux, 2002, pp. 60-84; 169-172). This empirical understanding allowed these women leaders to be able to be inclusive of potential followers who might not be included by others because of perceived flaws based on external conditions.

“I learned that you cannot decide what a person does or doesn’t know based on what you’re seeing surface wise. And I think that when you do that, you really find that people can contribute. But see, its getting past the incorrect English and getting to the substance to what people really bring to the table. And I think that when you do that, you really find that people can contribute” (MMB, narrative notes, p.171).

“If I work backwards, I would say what’s informed my leadership model, I don’t believe that being poor is equivalent to being stupid. I believe that from the ranks of the most destitute and the most disenfranchised has emerged true brilliance and true genius. And that it’s our job to nurture, find, foster and

coach that. That's my job. And when that happens, great things happen for our community and our country. I really believe that. And to foster the intellect you have to find the true intellect and foster it in those places" (SC, narrative notes, p.171).

One participant told how she made an effort to hear from negative people "because they can help you prepare to meet the public (and) help change some minds and some attitudes" (MMB, narrative notes, p. 174). This participant also included negative types of people when designing teams to assure that diversity in thought would emerge in group conversations. Another participant shared her understanding of how to work with, and encourage, people who felt undervalued.

"Undervalued people destroy things. Scripture says, when you oppress a wise man you make him angry. What do we have now, all these angry children. We've not shown them how to use those skills to benefit themselves. And I exhort the strengths. I never exhort the weaknesses" (ST, narrative notes, p.175)

The ability to engender trust is an imperative quality for leadership and is sometimes a hard earned virtue. The participants reasoned that their ability to engender trust, even with people not of their background or culture, came from their close walk with Christ and the reflection of their faith to others.

"And I work with people who for whatever reason, they will share all types of things with me. I don't know why. Maybe because I engender a trust and I don't have a judgment about it" (SC, narratives notes, p.157).

"See when you have a group of people together and you have a leader and you don't trust them and somebody else in that group you can't trust, you have to develop trust among that group. That's why you have to come together and talk it through. So when I work with people I want to draw out that deep stuff that they don't tell anybody. And when they can focus on that, they can forget about the other person. Because it's not about the other person, it's about what's on the inside of them to pull out. 'Cause if they can't bring to the table, and let other people eat from it, when are they going to pass on the unique gift of God in them?" (ST, narrative notes, p.158).

The consciousness for leadership in this group of women, evolved into demonstrated use of their faith through a style of leadership that was focused specifically to the empowerment of their followers. Having a servant's spirit in faithfulness to others was seen as a part of that leadership.

“And usually I'm a person that can sit back first. But when it doesn't work I'm a person who can come there and put it together with those same people who did not want to work with me. I do not know how. It's just that I have a servant's spirit. I don't assume that I have to be in charge” (ST, narratives notes, p.157).

“And also I truly believe that every leader has to know where the people are that they lead and guide because you're only a few steps ahead of them. And if you lose touch with the people you guide, you're not going very far either. So every now and then you have to stop, look back, go on the decks, see what's going on so you know what your people need” (FLH, narrative notes, pp.172-173).

Working in harmony with followers was achieved through the careful forming of teams and networking. One participant built teams through visions from the Lord. “And what the Lord brings to me is that everybody has a piece of that vision that I’ve seen in them. And we call it grassroots, but I’ve done that because I have faith in every one of those people” (ST, narrative notes, p.186). Another participant focuses on the relationship aspects of working with followers.

“Everything boils down to relationships. If you don’t know how to build relationships, you don’t raise money, you don’t get work done. But in any kind of leadership the bottom line and top line is relationship building. You can’t create relationships, you can’t have a business” (MA, narrative notes, p.173).

Empowering others emerged as a central theme in leadership behavior in all of the participants. The welfare of the followers, motivating them and giving them a sense of accomplishment were seen as measures of successful leadership.

“Giving people a sense that they can do things empowers them. It’s all about doing those things that you do to empower people and give them a sense that ‘I can do this and if I try it and if I crash it will be okay I can get up and start over again.’ I think that’s what you have to do and then you take away some of the fear and develop real competence in people” (MMB, narrative notes, p. 187).

“And I think when we reach out and help others, it’s really true, you really do help yourself. And that is what I try to do” (FLH, narrative notes, p.186).

“I invite conversations with people to push them and let them do things. I don’t need to lead or to do it all. I’m not a micro manager” (MA, narrative notes, p.187).

“But this is the way, you can’t be so high and mighty and you have to treat everybody the same. I’m just the same. I sure don’t have any more money than anybody else. But the thing about it is not putting yourself up on a pedestal” (NHB, narrative notes, p.167).

Conclusion

This dissertation on *African American Women Leadership in its Social and Cultural Background: A Multiple Case Study* (Meux, 2002), showed that the traditional African American Protestant church held a primary influence in the lives of African American women leaders. It was a basis of the cultural and social context that sets the stage for the development of a consciousness of an empowerment style of leadership. Although other organizations, clubs or professional groups inspired aspects of the leadership development of socially oriented African American women leaders, the research unveiled that church was a primary filter of talents, self-identification, community understanding, opportunities to gain leadership type skills, and public exposure during the formative years of the women leaders. This influence was evident in current leadership practices, even in the women who were not currently active in a church community.

The church also influenced the development of a womanist perspective in all of the participants. This perspective manifested in a concern that extended equally to women, men and youth and the women said that they would not become involved with activities that were not supportive of their culture or of people from all walks of life.

The women developed a strong consciousness towards social justice issues and activities at a young age through exposure to social injustices in society. They were provided spiritual strength and practical strategies to develop a sense of resilience and understanding about these issues. The participants functioned on the belief that they were accountable to God for the style and results of their leadership. This also meant they felt a responsibility to do well with their lives and to give back to their people and community. Leadership therefore, was not compartmentalized from how they behaved in others areas

of their lives as reflected in the women's use of the same skills in the church, workplace or community.

There were multiple points of practical and theoretical significance of this research. By 2005, the workforce will be diversified to the point that no one group will be a majority. Over 85 percent of workers will be women and people of diverse ethnic backgrounds (Carr-Ruffino, 2000). The globalization of business will shrink international borders and increase cross-cultural encounters and transactions. It will be imperative to understand how people of diverse cultural backgrounds function in leadership and normative leadership theories will no longer be able to be generalized to the populations.

The fact that in the African American culture, faith integration is a key component in successful leadership behavior of some African American women has been explored. The exploratory research also provided a foundation to conduct further studies on which to construct a new theory of empowerment leadership and supports a method to study leadership styles in ethnic populations. It is now important that these findings be expanded and used to structure continued research in this area of leadership with other diverse population groups.

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Biography

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Consuelo has lived in Cameroon, West Africa, and has traveled to Zambia, Zimbabwe and Nigeria. In July of this year, she went to Capetown, South Africa as part of a leadership team with the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities to negotiate international exchange opportunities for faculty and students.

Dr. Meux has an earned Bachelor of Science degree in marketing, a Master of Science degree in organizational behavior, a Master of Arts degree in organization development and a Ph.D. in Human and Organization Systems from Fielding Graduate Institute.

Consuelo is an active member of Saints Community Church where she serves on the ministry team.