

## **A Black Feminist Critique of American Christian Antiwar (Dis)engagements**

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May 1, 2009 marked five years since former President Bush declared "mission accomplished"; however, the U.S. still has 174,200 troops deployed in Iraq and 41,300 American troops in Afghanistan (U.S. Department of Defense 2009). Over 1 million have been deployed to the Middle East within this decade alone, a majority of whom have been sent to Iraq (U.S. Department of Defense 2009; Kane, 2006: chart 3). New legislation has been approved to support President Barack Obama's request for continuing military and diplomatic operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to AP sources, "Obama is sending more than 20,000 additional troops there and, for the first time next year, the annual cost of the war in Afghanistan is projected to exceed the cost of fighting in Iraq. . . .The underlying war funding measure has gotten relatively little attention, even though it would boost total approved spending for the Iraq and Afghanistan wars above \$900 billion" (AP May 21, 2009). This is happening while poor and working class communities languish in the U.S.

Unemployment hit 9.4 percent in May 2009 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009) "and is expected to hit double digits this year. . ." (<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/30863272>). The entire nation suffers from the effects of the recession. However, African-Americans are disproportionately affected. The black unemployment rate was already in the double digits at fifteen percent in May 2009 (Parker 2009). Both underclass and middle-class African-Americans are overrepresented among the unemployed. "The number of (African-Americans) who graduated from college and are now unemployed sits at 7.2 percent, which is almost twice the rate of whites and is also higher than that of (Latino) and Asian American grads" (*Chicago Sun Times*).

Nevertheless, the public outcry over continued U.S. deployments to the Middle East has waned since the 2008 presidential election. And Christian religious groups' voices are especially absent from the public domain in regards to U.S. government spending in the Middle East and U.S. involvement in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other potential sites.

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### Background Literature and New Questions

Since I am a preacher by calling, I suppose it is not surprising that I have seven major reasons for bringing Vietnam into the field of my moral vision. There is at the outset a very obvious and almost facile connection between the war in Vietnam and the struggle I, and others, have been waging in America. A few years ago there was a shining moment in that struggle. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor—both black and white—through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the buildup in Vietnam, and I watched this program broken and eviscerated, as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube. So, I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.

-Martin Luther King, Jr. "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence" Delivered 4 April 1967, at a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned at Riverside Church in New York City.

There is a strong antiwar sentiment within various Protestant African-American religious traditions. Martin Luther King, Jr. made impassioned statements against the Vietnam War over forty years ago. This tradition has been taken up by a new generation of clergy who echo King's statements in their fight to end wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and to prevent a war in Iran (Sekou 2009). While some critics have begun to address the new militancy of post-civil rights African-American clergy (Lee, 2003; Brown, 2006; Reese, Brown and Ivers, 2007; Roberts, 2007; Barnes, 2008) and the political activism within congregations (Beyerlein and Chaves, 2003), antiwar activism of these clergy has not been addressed in the social science literature.

This essay is based on a comparative analysis of predominantly African-American Protestant Evangelical ministers and their parishoners as contrasted with white Protestant Evangelical leadership and multiracial flock with regard to the extent to which they address U.S. aggression in the Middle East and Afghanistan in their words and actions. Analyzing ethnographic data collected in three sites, I ask: Are these issues taken up in the pulpit or smaller group discussions among church members? What humanitarian, activists or other activities are encouraged and carried out in the name of religious values and dictates?

I am interested in looking at differences among Evangelical denominations<sup>1</sup> because I find political differences between African-American and white Protestants to be fascinating. To look at antiwar and pro-war sentiment within churches necessitates acknowledging what is occurring in Evangelical circles. Popular understandings of

Evangelicalism often get reduced to white, politically conservative, Evangelical religion and politics. Here, I attempt to trouble oversimplifications by offering a corrective that considers how the intersection of race, class, gender, and other spheres of inequality informs cleavages within Evangelical communities.

I propose that antiwar engagement is not just a given. Though the majority of Americans today do not support the idea of fighting a war in Iraq or Afghanistan to end “terror,” very few are involved in active war protest. The extent of even passive protest from a visible minority seems to be limited to the wearing of the peace sign, now marketed to juniors, “tweens,” and older women. But to take activism to the arena of public discourse is rare, especially since the election of President Obama. According to many religious organizations and social movement theorists (Salime, 2005; Calhoun-Brown, 2001; Myers, 2005), requisite physical and ideological resources are necessary precursors to specific outcomes of interest. Similarly, I theorize that certain activism-promoting institutional structures are important antecedents of antiwar activism in the post-9/11 era. In this paper, I look at one characteristic of those structures that I believe is strongly connected to social activism: fundamentals of black feminist organizational methods. To the extent that religious organizations have elements of a black feminist organizing structure, I theorize that those organizations will be apt to tackle militarism and protest the “war on terror.”

### My Theory

All women of color and poor women are endangered by the ballooning budget deficits. While money for military contractors and the Pentagon flows abundantly, programs that benefit women and families are slashed. We know that children will go without childcare, elders will go without needed medications, women and children will sleep in the streets, in parks and in cars, while our tax dollars are spent bombarding peoples with whom we have no quarrel.

- February 16, 2003, statement by the Women of Color Resource Center entitled “No More War!! Women of Color Raise their Voices to Oppose War in Iraq!” (INCITE 2004:1).

In this paper, I argue that Black feminist organizational structures, including those within religious organizations, lend themselves to progressive activism, in particular antiwar activism. Conversely, it is my belief that religious organizations that reflect a patriarchal structure will be more likely to be aligned with individuals (leadership and flock) who are conservative and who would not become involved with progressive activism of any kind. Elsewhere I have argued that black feminist methods of organizing have distinct features (Zerai, 2000; 2002; 2005; Zerai and Salime, 2006). These include a nonhierarchical leadership structure (Zerai and Campbell, 2005), use of integrated analysis in program and day-to-day discussions,

recognition of relational difference, attention to local and global issues, strategies that are dynamic, and a focus on outcomes rooted in everyday people's experiences and desires (Zerai and Salime, 2006).

In previous work, Zakiya Salime and I ask, "What are the contributions of black feminism to methods of organizing to end oppression, specifically against war, racism, and repression?" (Zerai and Salime, 2006). We analyzed discussions from the Women of Color Resource Center (WCRC) and INCITE! websites, the Black Feminist Caucus (BFC), the Black Radical Caucus (BRC), and War Times to provide evidence of black feminist analysis and organizing methods among black feminists, women of color, and progressives in the antiwar movement of 2001–2004. The features of black feminist organizing delineated above are discussed in detail in this and other work (Zerai and Samile, 2006; Zerai and Campbell, 2005). Briefly, in analyzing the operation of the Black Radical Congress Convention of June 2003, Campbell and I found that a nonhierarchical, collective approach ensued. Three co-chairs organized the Congress, giving rise to some conflict but providing an opportunity for input and participation by numerous constituencies in the planning of the event. A non-hierarchical structure is one that places emphasis on democratic participation (Zerai and Campbell, 2005). Use of integrated analysis is a hallmark of black feminism. This integrated analysis is referred to by many names, most notably "race, class, gender" analysis or "intersectionality" (Collins, 1990, 1998, 2000). "The most important analytic tool of Black feminist thought is intersectionality—a paradigm for reconceptualizing oppression and resistance" (Collins, 2000). "Race, class, and gender intersectionality is a framework for analyzing ways that various spheres of inequality work together to simultaneously affect social life" (Zerai, 2008).

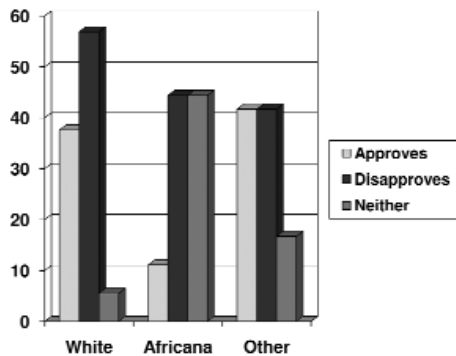
Relational differences, one aspect of an intersectional analysis, means that we move beyond only recognizing differences between individuals who occupy different social locations to seeing how privileged groups' social location is enabled by the oppression of dominated groups. Put simply, their differences in access to power influence their social locations (See Brown, 1995; Zerai and Banks, 2002; Zerai, 2008). Paying attention to local and global issues and using dynamic strategies are both features of black feminism articulated in Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* (1990). Finally, Black feminist organizing must be organically tied to and representative of multiple distinct groupings within African communities and rooted in everyday people's experiences and desires (Collins, 1990; Zerai and Campbell, 2005; Zerai and Salime, 2006). Organizing starts with the knowledge base and experiences of community members. Even the voices of the most marginalized should be reflected. There is no room for exclusionary practices among African, African-American or Caribbean men, heterosexuals, middle-class African-Americans, or Christians (see also Zinn, Cannon, Higginbotham, and Dill, 1986). These features are each integral to black feminism because each is articulated in the seminal works on black feminism.<sup>2</sup>

**Methods**

The findings reported below come from the analysis of four sources: (1) my analysis of nationally representative and opinion poll data to establish variations in antiwar sentiment according to respondents' race and religious denomination, (2) unobtrusive participant observation of a sample of black and multiracial churches, (3) transcripts of sermons, and (4) content analysis of church websites and weekly bulletins.

There have been several articles written addressing the political cleavages within Protestant and other religious congregations in the U.S. since the late 1990s (for example, Beyerlein and Chaves, 2003). Much of this work has been stimulated by the availability of new data, the National Congregation Survey (NCS), created in cooperation with the General Social Survey.<sup>3</sup> It is the first nationally representative sample of U.S. congregations. Mark Chaves spearheaded this effort (Chaves, Konieczny, Beyerlein, and Barman, 2000; Chaves, Giesel, and Tsitsos, 2002; and Chaves and Anderson, 2008). Data sets were collected in 1998 and 2007. The 2007 data will be made available this year. However, I have analyzed results from the preliminary 2007 data to provide some background on variations in views on domestic and foreign policy. I also analyze American National Election Survey (ANES) pilot data from 2006 and *CBS News/New York Times* opinion poll data from May 2007 which provide more specificity than the NCS on U.S. Christians' views of Bush's handling of foreign relations, specifically his handling of the war in Iraq. Below, I analyze raw data.

**Chart 1. Percentage of Protestants who approved of Bush's Foreign Relations, ANES 2006**

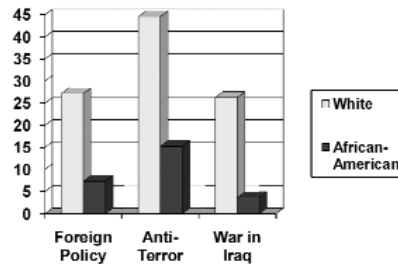


N.B. All chi square results are statistically significant @ .001 level.

### Descriptive, Nationally Representative, and Opinion Poll Data

First, I analyzed the 2006 American National Election Pilot Study to get some sense of the distribution in opinion on the so-called “war on terror” (see chart 1)<sup>4</sup>. The best variable I could find is an assessment of Bush’s work in foreign relations, and the latest data available is from 2006. Chart 1 shows that white Protestants, most of whom are Evangelical in their leanings, were three times more likely to approve of Bush’s handling of foreign relations in 2006 relative to African-Americans: 37.6% of white Protestants approved while 11.7% of African-American Protestants approved of Bush’s handling of foreign relations. These results are statistically significant at the .001 level.

Chart 2. Percentage of respondents who support President Bush’s Handling of Foreign Policy, “Terrorism”, and War in Iraq, CBS News/New York Times Monthly Poll May 2007



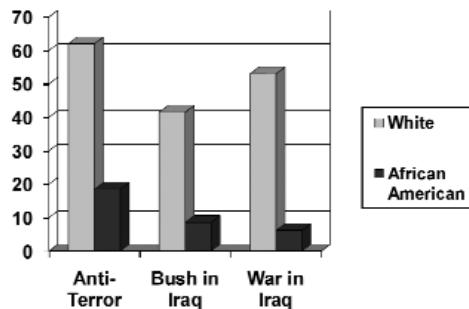
N.D. All chi-square results are statistically significant @ .001 level.

The *CBS News/New York Times* opinion poll asks more specific questions about Bush’s handling of Iraq, how those polled felt the U.S. was progressing in Iraq, and about Bush’s anti-terrorism efforts. I have this data from as late as May 2007<sup>5</sup>. Distinguishing these three variables by race yields interesting results. As shown in chart 2, I find that whites are almost four times more likely than African-Americans to support Bush in his foreign policy, three times more likely to support his handling of terrorism, and six times more likely to support his handling of the war in Iraq relative to African-Americans in this data set. (All chi-square results are statistically significant at the .001 level).

The *CBS News/New York Times* poll further addresses more specificity as to religious tradition. Among Evangelical Christians, the differences by race are stark (see chart 3). In my analysis of this data I find that white Evangelical Christians are more than three times more likely than African-American Evangelicals to support Bush in his handling of terrorism, and five times more likely to support his handling of the war in Iraq relative to African-Americans in this data set. They

further ask if the Iraq action was “the right thing to do,” and white Evangelicals are almost nine times more likely to agree with this statement relative to African-American Evangelicals. (All results are statistically significant at the .001 level.)

**Chart 3. Percentage who support President Bush’s Handling of Foreign Policy, “Terrorism”, and War in Iraq, among Evangelical Christians, CBS News/New York Times Monthly Poll May 2007**



### **“Typical” Opinions from Evangelicals on U.S. Aggression in the Middle East; Quantitative Valuations of Differences in Opinion**

As shown above, the 2007 data bear out my expectations. However, African-Americans are more likely to provide a middle-of-the-road response in regards to Bush’s handling of foreign relations (as Chart 1 shows, 44.4% of African-American Protestants neither approve nor disapprove of Bush’s foreign relations, compared to only 5.5 of white Protestants). But in all, though African-American and white parishioners agree on fundamental principles of Christian faith (e.g. the view that Jesus is the Son of God, as revealed in analyses of the NCS<sup>6</sup> and ANES, not shown here) and are similarly actively engaged in church activities, they by and large are in complete disagreement regarding U.S. domestic and foreign policy, as shown in charts 1 and 3.

### **Ethnography of Sites and the Presence or Absence of Black Feminist Organizational Characteristics, Part A: Description of Three Sites**

There are no national data sets to my knowledge that ask about antiwar activism within churches. So, in my qualitative analysis, I begin to explore the extent to which antiwar (or pro-war) sentiments

are communicated from the pulpit, in church bulletins, newsletters and web presence by church members in three sites. Further, I look at whether there is evidence of activism within these sites to end the “war on terror.” I have observed several multiracial congregations over the past five years. This work is part of a larger project that examines multiracialism in Evangelical settings. The three sites I analyze for this paper include:

- Site One, East Central City: A multiracial congregation and leadership located in the heart of a major metropolitan city in the East;
- Site Two, Midwest Regional City: Located in a major metropolitan area in the Midwest, an African-American congregation and leadership that is part of a predominantly white denomination; and
- Site Three, Mid-sized City: Multiracial congregation and leadership that is part of a predominantly white denomination located in the Midwest.

According to commonly held notions of what constitutes an African-American congregation [that is, that 75 to 80% of its membership is African-American, (Beyerlein and Chaves, 2003)], two of my sites are considered African-American while one is considered multiracial. Further explanation of the composition of these sites is helpful. The multiracial East Central City site has an African-American female lead pastor, but most of her associate pastors are white and her board is mostly white. Her membership is about 50% African-American. The Midwest Regional City site is over 90% African-American. The Mid-sized City site is considered African-American by membership, though the pastor is white and the denomination is largely white. With the exception of the East Central City site, all lead pastors are men and most associate pastors are men.<sup>7</sup>

I chose these three sites for this analysis because out of the dozen churches at which I have conducted fieldwork over a five-year period, these were the only three to directly address the Iraq war and/or the “war on terror” in the pulpit, special events at the parish or in its publications. I do not present these three settings as ideal types for engagement in antiwar work. At least two of the three sites, in fact, are unique in their identity, program, resources, and membership. As opposed to a concern with representativeness and generalizability, I hoped with this study to capture a valid picture of antiwar work, given that antiwar work in Evangelical churches is so rare.

*An Oasis in the Village.* Site One is in the middle of East Central City, a busy hub connected to commerce, higher education, and the best and worst of post-modern American society. Well-known parks are interspersed in the web of buildings. Many homeless people call these parks their home.

There is a vibrant group of well-resourced staff providing a labor of love at the first church under examination that I refer to as “an Oasis.” The lead minister has a number of associate ministers with whom she works. The church is well-endowed. They receive most



of their budget from the denomination. This church is therefore poised to do inner city ministry. This provides many unique opportunities for this congregation. They have a respectable outreach to the homeless population in the immediate community, providing clothing and food on a regular basis. They normally employ a minister of social justice, and one of the associate ministers is gay. There are several programs organized at this church to make it a truly opening and welcoming congregation. Their advertisements feature a plus sign to indicate they are an inclusive space. The lead minister does not use gender specific pronouns when referring to God, and the messages are universalist in their content and delivery.

The religious tradition is liberal. Furthermore, this congregation parts from its main denomination on some important matters. For example, Site One has been sanctioned by the wider denomination for its liberal stance on gay marriage. In the newsletter, a member writes that he does not accept the Bible as the inerrant word of God: "belief in the inerrancy of scripture . . . has given rise to a narrow, exclusive, and dogmatic social agenda." And the congregation proclaims an acceptance of Jesus's humanity, another indicator of a liberal theology. The senior minister explains a passage in scripture: "Even Jesus could be entrapped by our human tendency to withhold love and care and compassion for the 'other'." However, while this church is not theologically fundamentalist, unlike its denominational counterparts, it does have some Pentecostal elements in worship resulting from its gospel choir, which sings every other Sunday.<sup>8</sup>

As far as incorporating principles of black feminist organizing in its structure, this site stands at the forefront among the three under examination. The lead minister and one of her associate ministers are African-American women.<sup>9</sup> This is the only church of the three that has women in top leadership. But this is not enough to ensure that elements of an organizational structure are not patriarchal. The leadership is non-hierarchical to some extent, in that a board of elders makes decisions on hiring, pay rates for staff, and similar matters. Another element of a shared leadership structure is that there is not just one voice that speaks for the congregation in the pulpit and in the public domain. The various ministers take turns preaching so that in a typical month, the lead minister preaches only two or three times, and associate ministers or guests preach the other weeks.

In their main publication, a monthly newsletter that is distributed in hard copy and is posted on the church's website, the lead minister has a monthly column; however, two or three of the associate pastors have columns every month, and members contribute regularly to the publication. There is even a section of the newsletter in which members are invited to share their vision of what it means to belong to their church. Thus, the vision of this church is rooted in everyday people's desires and experiences. All of the characteristics of black feminist organizing structure are present in this church. Integrated analysis that considers the intersection of race, class, gender and sexuality is a mainstay of the congregation's public discourse and analysis of social problems. For example, regular workshops are held on white privilege, sharing of power (which addresses relational difference<sup>10</sup>), "puzzling passages" in the Bible regarding homosex-

uality, what it means to be an inclusive space, and opportunities to heal “scars from racial, ethnic, gender and sexual orientation differences” and “celebrate (the) gifts” of diversity. (Middle Notes, 2008-2009). The local and global are addressed in benevolence, political events and activism. This is the most progressive of the three sites. Its motto is “come as you are.”

*Afrocentric Rhetoric Meets Evangelical Message.* The second site is located in a historical African-American community that is part and parcel of Midwest Regional City. It is one of the largest churches within the United Church of Christ (UCC). While the UCC is a predominantly white denomination, this parish is not only African-American but Afrocentric. Afrocentric cultural indicators richly texture the church edifice, programs, and member interactions. For example, the website background features African patterns and colors and the caption “Imagine a place where Africa is part of one’s theology.” In describing on the website the congregation’s various ministries, the Counseling Ministry is distinguished in that it is “grounded in the Black Value System.” One writer describes this church, saying that the “colors of Africa” are dominant in the Sunday morning services (Mansfield, 2008). The 200-member choir wears not traditional European robes but African garb in which to sing on Sunday. They sit behind the pulpit, so truly the “colors of Africa” cannot be missed in this church’s services. The church budget comes predominantly from member donations. Membership size is purported to be upwards of 8,500 (Keogh, 2007, p. 1). But the service attendance is somewhere in the realm of 1,000 at the most populated of the two Sunday services and probably about 500 at the other earlier Sunday worship service. This cutting-edge church has several associate pastors, including a pastor whose focus is Drama Ministry. The services are well-choreographed, culminating in a 20-minute message by the lead pastor that is basically Evangelical in its tone, though he often refers to his children, the black community, and issues of political relevance during his sermons.

The denomination is traditionally Evangelical. “Evangelical Christianity includes denominations such as Methodists and Baptists (and is marked by its emphasis on conversion” (Robbins, 2004, p. 119). Adherents must “‘voluntarily’ choose Evangelical faith on the basis of a powerful conversion experience”; in other words, they must be “born again” (Robbins, 2004, p. 120). This religious tradition is taken up in full force in Site Two, as they strongly identify with their denomination. In all of their publications and their church’s website, the wider denomination’s emblem is featured. The church sponsors a biblical studies institute. The purpose is to be “transformed to serve,” captured by a New Revised Standard Version biblical verse on their website that introduces the institute, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Romans 12:1-21).

There are several African-American women who serve as associate pastors in this site. However, the lead pastor is male and the church has been traditionally associated with its well-known Pastor Emeritus who is also male. Afrocentric theory and cultural forms

have been associated with a male-centered discourse that black and African feminists have challenged in theoretical works and in practice (Sudbury, 1998; Collins, 2006; Davies, 1994; and Kuumba 2002). Site Two has a strong pastor model and is somewhat hierarchical. The church is led by a team of pastors; however, the focus on Sunday morning and in public presence is on the lead pastor. The lead pastor preaches most Sundays, unless guests (who are usually male pastors from other congregations) preach. The other aspects of the services all serve to build up to the male lead pastor's sermon, the clear climax of the Sunday worship experience. In web presence, the website features pictures of the lead pastor and his words, including a prominent link to download audio from his Sunday morning sermons. A weekly email from the church's listserv, which serves as a weekly newsletter, features numerous pictures of the lead pastor. For example, in one 8-page e-mail message, it is typical to have as many as four pictures of the lead pastor. The associate pastors are almost never featured in these weekly emails. This church demonstrates very few characteristics that would distinguish it as having a black feminist organizing structure.

*Leadership and Congregation at Odds.* This midsized, city church is the least well-attended of the three sites. While it was a thriving church in the past, due to losses in key members its attendance has dwindled. This church would be considered African-American by quantitative valuations even though the denomination of the church and the lead pastor are white. This church was led by a board of elders that excluded the minister since its inception. For a significant portion of the church's history, the lead elder was African-American. However, this board of elders has virtually disappeared and has certainly lost power in recent years due to membership losses. There are not associate pastors at this church; there is not even a secretary, only an Education Director. There has been some conflict brewing at this church between the pastor and the handful of members who have attended the church since its early beginnings. The two sides of the brewing issues are divided by race. The white pastor preaches pro-Bush, pro-Israel and antiterrorism sentiments from the pulpit. A number of African-American congregants disagree with this sentiment. Several members have left this church.

This church, like Site Two, is Evangelical. It fits squarely into the Evangelical roots of its denomination. In its Sunday bulletin, it proclaims, "(Site Three's) purpose for existence is to glorify God. We are a multiracial, multicultural community committed to making disciples." Indicating a less-than inclusive tradition, they practice closed communion. "Our time of communion is open to all who believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." Membership among those who are welcome to join the weekly practice of communion is limited to those who have "publically accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior" and who have participated in baptism by full immersion.

This congregation has a female African-American Education Director, the only person on staff other than the pastor. Site Three had potential for a more non-hierarchical structure in the past. But the board of elders is virtually non-functioning. In violation of dictates

from the past, the lead pastor serves as an elder now, due to paltry membership numbers. Thus, power is more concentrated at this church relative to the others that I examined. The usage of “minister” versus “pastor” is a designation of significance. In the past at Site Three, the worship leader’s title was “minister.” This term refers to biblical interpretations describing every member of a church as a minister who shares the responsibility to live a life that is Christ-like, to spread the good news of Christ, and to attend to the needs of others. When the present worship leader took over the reins some years ago, he defied the tradition of the church and changed his title to “pastor.” “Pastor” is a more hierarchical designation denoting a higher level of spiritual development relative to the congregation and a church leader who has the responsibility to care for “the flock,” similar to a shepherd. Some members at Site Three have taken issue with this change in title.

While attention is paid to relational difference, integrated analysis, and social change at the other churches examined, these issues are not addressed in Sunday morning worship services nor are they addressed in their monthly newsletter or events at the third site. Of the three sites, this site has the fewest characteristics of the feminist organizing framework. In fact, women are not considered to be eligible to serve as elders in this denomination, clear evidence of a patriarchal leadership structure. And feminism is considered to be a school of thought antithetical to Christianity by numerous (especially male) adherents.

### **Ethnography, Part B: Themes**

I expected to see the churches fall on some kind of continuum in their views on antiwar activism. Instead, I found three distinct positions on political engagement, whether based on activism regarding bringing the troops home or any other issue related to social justice. Each of the parishes examined represents one of these three positions, as follows:

- “Open, inclusive, spiritual, activist” (Site One)
- Talk the talk, walk the walk, and don’t forget to tithe! (Site Two)
- Social justice as a “bunny trail” (Site Three)

*Open, inclusive, spiritual, activist.*

“Our faith values: caring for the poor, putting children in the forefront of our care, welcoming everyone, and being fully inclusive, advocating social justice, and racial reconciliation. . .”

–Statement from the senior minister at Site One

Site One (“An Oasis”) addresses the social gospel, inclusion, deep engagement and spiritual development in Sunday morning messages, newsletters, bulletins, web presence, and special events. Spiritual growth, for this church, is at least partially reflected in political commitment to the downtrodden. One parishioner succinctly sum-

marizes Site One's politic motivated by its understanding of the gospel with the words, "open, inclusive, spiritual, activist." Forging this identity has provided cohesion among members. The senior minister explains that Site One is no accident, as it is a "multiracial, multicultural experiment . . . clearly in the center of God's will for humanity. . ." She congratulates her congregation regularly for their efforts to cohere. "Thank you for rehearsing the reign of God here on earth!!" Dougherty and Huyser argue that creation of a congregational identity is crucial to the success of multiracial churches (2008).

According to its documents, Site One sees political engagement as central to its mission. An associate minister encourages members in its newsletter, saying, "It is time to lead the revolution through our unique voice." The political issues they take up include local issues of importance to the residents of the their hamlet of Central City, mission work in the Gulf Coast and in Ghana, special events focused on the gay rights movement, poetry readings to promote social change, and an active outreach to depressed individuals. Another indicator of Site One's goals is reflected in their products. Several projects are born from the creative energies of Site One's members and allies. For example, motivated by their understanding of Jesus' teachings, a new institute was created and described as a "liberationist, ecumenical and interdisciplinary (project that focuses on) progressive religion" as a vehicle for delivering the promise of a just society to everyone. They further state that they support "equal opportunity for all irrespective of race, religion, gender and sexual orientation."

This is the only site where the leadership was explicitly involved in antiwar activism. Their engagement included events at the church, co-sponsorship of antiwar events in the city, and antiwar sentiments articulated in public documents. For example, they co-sponsored a film night to screen a movie, one of four antiwar events occurring within a six-month period that "gives special attention to parallels between the Vietnam War and the war in Iraq." Further, the senior minister writes, ". . . our leaders still think war serves as a negative good. They don't quite get it . . . that no nation can live alone. . . . I dream of peace that comes from negotiation, from diplomacy, from prayer, through love." While the social gospel dominated this site more than any other, ministers and congregants by and large articulated some antiwar sentiment and participated in occasional activism, with the exception of the social justice minister who was more consistently involved in antiwar actions but was only briefly on their staff during my observations. With all of the other work the staff, ministers and congregants were involved in, it appears there is little time left over for extensive antiwar activism.

*Talk the talk, walk the walk, and don't forget to tith!*

**Importance of the tith.** At Site Two, while spiritual development was primary in the messages communicated from the pulpit, support for African heritage imbues every aspect of the service, weekly activities, the physical structure of the church, the bookstore, and various church subgroups. So concern with promoting African

heritage is a close second to the focus on spiritual development. Material concerns are quite important in this site. Given the size of the church structure itself, it makes sense. After all, this is an Afrocentric church with a 200-member choir. Mortgages are high on a church that can house thousands of people.<sup>11</sup> Mortgage payments of \$50,000 per month are typical for a church of this size. Certainly, concerns with meeting their financial commitments are an important subtext on Sunday morning and in supplemental communications from the church. After visiting three times from over 100 miles away, I was sent an offering envelope number. I also received cards on which to set aside funds for a Lenten offering.

***Talking the talk: expressing views consistent with African-American cultural nationalist rhetoric and values.*** “Talking the talk and walking the walk” is another important theme for this site. At Site Two, the congregants literally wear their politics on their chests. Not only does the African garb worn by the choir members and many attendees speak to an African-American cultural nationalist sensibility, but parishioners wore Obama t-shirts, pins, hats and buttons to church during the election season (and subsequent to it). There was a clear expectation that the lead pastor would mention current political debates relevant to the African-American community during his sermons. These utterances were encouraged with hardy “Amens,” clapping hands, and other boisterous comments from the audience.

A part of “talking the talk and walking the walk” relates to the importance of promoting self-esteem of the church members’ children, another Afrocentric value. I witnessed several special additions to the services over the months I attended, including a Father’s Day tribute in which the young girls danced with their fathers while a Luther Vandross song played in the background. On another occasion, members saw a “step” presentation by mothers and their pre-teen children to congratulate the promotion of middle school and junior high students and to honor the efforts of their mothers to help them succeed in school and in life in general. The dedication of babies which followed an African ritual similar to Alex Haley’s character Kunta Kinte in *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, where he raised up his son to the sky to dedicate him to the community, a mission demonstrably set forth by their African ancestors, further exemplified the importance of “walking the walk” to promote African-American children’s positive identity. Soft African drums played in the background during this ritual while the choir sang a mother’s love song to an African cadence and rhythm.

***“Walking the walk”: an expression of congregants’ accountability to God, country, and family.*** What is surprising is that there is an expression of responsibility to God, country and family reminiscent of white Evangelical rhetoric. The website description of Site Two’s Black Value System reads:

Prayerfully, we have called upon the wisdom of all past generations of suffering Blacks for guidance in fashioning an instrument of Black self-determination, the Black Value System. . . . These Black Ethics must be taught and

exemplified in homes, churches, nurseries and schools, wherever Blacks are gathered.

Further, members of Site Two express their “accountability to God” by promoting members’ spiritual growth, evidenced at least partially by tithing. Members in Site Two express their “accountability to country” by contributing to the electorate, as they see themselves in line with the civil rights objectives expressed by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and now carried out by President Barack Obama. The congregation organized weekly voter registration drives during the 2008 election period. The pastor preached in mid-2008, “in 1888 at the Republican National Convention Frederick Douglass was nominated; he received one vote. . . . But in 2008, Barack Obama was selected as Democratic nominee for President. Look what the Lord has done!” Their responsibility to family is expressed through their focus on children, with a significant focus also on intact family arrangements. The senior pastor preached, “Anytime you become so self-serving that you forget about the God who put you in the position you are, you jeopardize family, community and nation. Because of relationships God has not ordained, we are killing our children. You have a choice! David didn’t have to sleep with Bathsheba!” The themes of God, country and family permeate the Sunday services, pastor’s messages, the mission of the church, and its web presence. However, in this church they articulate their accountability to “God, country, and family” with an Afrocentric flair.

The social gospel was key to the structure, as this church has a social justice pastor. The social gospel made an appearance in the content of some services, and is promoted in weekly publications, as the social justice pastor has a regular column in the Sunday morning bulletin. An Interfaith Workers for Justice “Litany for Workers” insert was added to the Sunday bulletin one week that was read aloud. “God, you stand with poor and disenfranchised, and for justice among people. Please show us how to do the same. God hear our prayer” (Boyd 1). However, other than a unison reading of social justice-promoting material from time to time, and normative participation in electoral activities, a mention or requirement to engage in antiwar activism was absent.

***Social justice as a “bunny trail.”*** I was actually shocked when the pastor at Site Three preached on a Sunday morning that some churches are “distracted” by pet projects like social justice. He said, “Social justice is a bunny trail.” Site Three is the smallest and most fledgling of the three churches under examination. It has a white, middle-aged pastor who is completely out of touch with his congregation. In fact, he has been demoted to a part-time status, perhaps to better reflect his efforts given to the congregation.

This pastor’s sermons were repetitive. Once Obama won the presidency, the panic-ridden themes of the “end times,” the coming financial tragedies of America, and the need for every member to stock up their pantry in preparation for mass poverty and hunger “in America” reflect perhaps this pastor’s own angst about the challenges of financial markets. A few months after President Obama’s inauguration, the pastor of Site Three writes:

This is a time when we must all look up because looking around can only cause sorrow and fear. Our economy is failing as if by design; could we be more foolish than what is already coming forth from our "leaders"? We cannot look around and find peace. We must look up.

Another prominent theme in his messages is the threat of terrorism "in our own back yard." He spoke of possible terrorist cells located at a campus that is proximate to his mid-sized city, racially profiling Arab students there. He is the pastor who spoke most about the "War on Terror." But he spoke in support of Bush's efforts, quoting passages on the responsibility for Christians to pray for their leaders and accept their leaders' authority because leaders are imbued with God's authority. Once Obama was elected, however, he began to pray for the "misguided leaders" of this country and that those who truly have God's authority would be successful in imposing better agendas.

### Discussion

As we come more into touch with our own ancient, non-European consciousness of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes. . . . As they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. They become a safe-house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action (Lorde, 1984, p. 36-39).

Features of a black feminist organizational structure, one that is non-hierarchical, that challenges patriarchy, that privileges the lives and voices of rank-and-file members in its vision and program, and that works for social justice with creative strategies are coincident with a higher level of activism among church leadership and members among the three churches I have examined. However, the challenges of everyday living and the need to extend resources to address immediate needs of members divert efforts away from extensive anti-war activism at even the most progressive of the three sites.

As discussed in the analysis, I found significant differences among the sites under examination. To summarize, three salient areas in which I saw divergences were 1) social location of members, 2) the relationship between the leadership and the rank-and-file, and 3) variations in the centrality of social justice and activism to their mission.

The social location, also influenced by region, urbanity of the congregation, and racial/ethnic composition of the parish, of members in each site created a context for activism to take place or not. Site One, the "Oasis," was located in an eastern central city rife with activism. To be a member of the progressive community in this city was synonymous with involvement in some type of visible political activism. Members on staff or on the board who led classes and Bible studies in this congregation, by and large, were middle-class, upper-



middle-class, or wealthy individuals who saw their involvement in church activities as a way to give back to the community. They chose membership in Site One so that they could use their access to power to benefit the less privileged. The rank-and-file members and attendees of Site One included these privileged individuals as well as folks from all walks of life, including homeless men and women. The wider membership is clearly diverse. The senior minister, her staff, and the board intentionally created a balance in leadership representation and worship style so that the many cultures present in the church might be reflected in their collective identity.

In Site Two, the Afrocentric church, the membership consists of movers and shakers in the Midwest city as well as more moderate middle-class and working-class urban African-Americans. While members and leadership in this site share the experience of racial marginality, many represent an elite within its mid-western city African-American communities. In Site Three, on the other hand, while the membership is also largely African-American, their class status, race, gender, and ability locate them socially at the margins of their town. The members of Site Three are, by and large, working class and working poor African-American women. Several members are disabled as well.

This issue of social location of the membership is related to the second, distinguishing features among the three sites, the relationship between the leadership and members. In Site One, the most diverse site in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, and ability, the leadership mirrors the diversity of the membership in many ways (except class background and ability). And the differences between members are not ignored but embraced. The leadership works tirelessly to design programs, to create cultural products, and to fashion a church culture that is deliberate about creating shared community. The leadership consciously engages in a daily struggle to move beyond the difficulties of dissimilarity amongst members. The open, shared leadership style is one that invites members to partake in the work of redefining commonality on the basis of their shared ideals.

At Site Two, the leadership represents the rank-and-file almost completely. Where the leadership and members do diverge, the gap is filled by expectation. The leadership represents the best of what the membership hopes to be. The leadership is African-American, as is the membership. The leadership is led by a strong male pastor and a capable team of male and female African-American associate pastors. The leadership is highly educated and well-connected politically and socially within the community, city, state, and nation. The leadership style and structure of Site Two are less a shared leadership structure and a more hierarchical one, but this apparently suits the membership.

At Site Three, the class status of members in this church has diminished over time and, with this development, the relationship between the leadership and the congregation has changed. A more inclusive style of leadership characterized this congregation in the past when more middle-class members and men attended. A pastor-concentrated leadership has evolved with the loss of class status among church members.

The last issue to be addressed regarding differences among the sites is the ways in which they diverge on interest in activism and centrality of social justice in their mission. In Site One ("The Oasis"), activism is part of their identity and thus central to their day-to-day programming. In Site Two (the Afrocentric congregation), activism is a part of their theology; a primary preoccupation of black theology has been to assert the humanity of black folk and to proclaim an understanding of Christianity that is consonant with black liberation (Singleton, 2008). But the pastors and members in Site Two integrate this activist worldview in words uttered from the pulpit, in publications, and in the Sunday morning liturgy. However, involvement in formal political organizing was less central to their daily program efforts. It is important to note that congregants and pastors may disagree with this statement. It is conceivable that they would define counseling a couple considering marriage, coordinating after-school activities for youth, and planning rites of passage activities for middle school-aged children all as political acts because these acts are carried out in accordance with Afrocentric Black Family Values articulated in their documents and that are at their core political in nature. These Afrocentric values designate appropriate ways for black folk to promote self esteem and educational success of youth, preserve Black families, and harness power for Black communities in the context of racism in American society. Thus, promoting the basic survival of black families is viewed as a political act which is related to formal political participation (Reese, Brown, and Ivers, 2007), but does not necessarily translate to immediate visible externally directed political activism.

Finally, Site Three, while it has a majority of African-American members who might be sympathetic to the goals of left-leaning political activism, is on the whole somewhat ambivalent in its collective stance on political activism. And visible politically motivated efforts are nonexistent in Site Three. Given that the pastor of Site Three preaches against left politics, it follows that political activism is not part of this site's program.

With the exception of the last site, which has dwindled in membership and attendees and whose pastor is on the roll only part-time, the other two sites are focused more on bread and butter issues that they feel are of more immediate importance than antiwar activism. These churches are all interested in spreading their interpretation of the message of the good news of salvation. Even the third site speaks this in their rhetoric from the pulpit, in newsletters and in their activities that are driven by long standing members. Reaching out and bringing in those who need the good news, another word for the gospel, is the central concern at Evangelical Christian churches by definition. So I find very little antiwar activism.

### **Conclusion**

In fact, I am not the only one who has come to this conclusion. There are several interreligious antiwar events and organizations. Antiwar activism has become a niche market among activists broadly. Searches of recent antiwar activity leave me wanting. The re-

ligious pro-peace and justice advocates basically have had to find each other across denominational and religious lines in order to create a critical mass of individuals with whom to organize. This fact is not entirely bad news because models of interreligious cooperation are necessary in this conflict-ridden world. Agnostic, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Islamic and other activists' efforts to work together are a hopeful sign. And black feminist organizations, analysis and methods have much to contribute.

### Future Work

So far my exploration has been unobtrusive. The small size of the study that focuses on only three sites may be viewed as a limitation. The low level of antiwar organizing generally and specifically in Evangelical settings is partly to blame for this low sample size. However, some issues to consider in analyzing future data on black feminist organizing and antiwar activism have been identified. In the future, I hope to interview pastors who represent various points in the continuum that I identified through the data set analysis and their congregants to round out the picture of antiwar opinion and activism in these sites. Furthermore, it would be helpful to use the intersectional lens to look at niche interreligious antiwar organizations (such as Black Voices for Peace, Clergy and Laity Concerned about Iraq, and Fellowship of Reconciliation) to understand the challenges they face in getting their wider denominations, pastors and congregants involved in antiwar activism.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Evangelical Christianity promotes the view that the Bible is the inerrant word of God. This tradition further emphasizes the importance of a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Another hallmark of this tradition is the charge to "spread the gospel" or the "good news" of the faith (Robbins, 2004: 119). Some adherents within denominations that are traditionally considered to be Evangelical do not hold fast to each of these criteria.

<sup>2</sup> Conversely, elements of patriarchal organizing include (a) a hierarchical structure, usually led by male members of the organization, (b) an analysis of problems and possibilities of the organization that does not consider issues of race, class, and gender, and the ways that they mutually construct one another, (c) a recognition of differences between groups that does not appreciate the relational nature of those differences, (d) a lack of attention to the balance of addressing local and global issues, (e) use of static, tried-and-true strategies for accomplishing goals, and (f) being rooted more in "objective" analysis and external standards rather than everyday people's desires and experiences (see Zerai and Banks 2002 for further discussion).

<sup>3</sup> The General Social Survey (GSS), first collected in 1972, uses a modified probability sample and a cross-sectional design, and is housed at the NORC at the University of Chicago. The principal investigator is James Davis and co-principal investigators are Tom W. Smith and Peter V. Marsden.

<sup>4</sup> The Principal Investigators of the ANES: 2006 Pilot Study are Jon A. Krosnick and Arthur Lupia. It is a follow-up to the 2000, 2002, and 2004 Full Panel Study collected by the University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies. The data are representative of United States citizens of voting age on

or before Election Day (November 6, 2000). The sample came from individuals who completed a valid interview in the 2004 ANES time series study. The pilot study was conducted after the 2006 mid-term elections for the purpose of testing new questions and conducting methodological research to inform the design of future ANES studies. In their own words: "The American National Election Studies (ANES) produces high quality data on voting, public opinion, and political participation to serve the research needs of social scientists, teachers, students, policy makers and journalists who want to better understand the theoretical and empirical foundations of national election outcomes." (ANES, <http://www.electionstudies.org/> 9/16/2009).

<sup>5</sup> "This poll, fielded May 18-23, 2007, is a part of a continuing series of monthly surveys that solicit public opinion on the presidency and on a range of other political and social issues. An oversample of African-Americans was conducted for this poll. Respondents were asked whether they approved of the way George W. Bush was handling the presidency and issues such as immigration and foreign policy." The respondents are persons aged 18 and over living in households with telephones in the contiguous 48 United States. The ICPSR explains, "A variation of random-digit dialing using primary sampling units (PSUs) was employed, consisting of blocks of 100 telephone numbers identical through the eighth digit and stratified by geographic region, area code, and size of place" (Description & Citation—Study No. 23444).f

<sup>6</sup> The National Congregations Study was conducted in conjunction with the General Social Survey (GSS) in 1998 and 2007. The GSS asked respondents to name their religious congregation. Since the GSS is a nationally representative sample, it follows that the NCS approximates a representative sample of US places of worship as well. The 2004 NCS is a replication of the 1998 NCS. For my analysis I examine preliminary data released from the 2007 wave.

<sup>7</sup> I have chosen not to identify each church because my purpose in this analysis is not to expose these churches, to congratulate or vilify them for their activism or lack thereof, but to engage the intellectual challenge of considering whether elements of black feminist organizing facilitate or impede antiwar work.

<sup>8</sup> According to Robbins (2004), Pentecostalism's roots lie in the Protestant Evangelical tradition (p 119). Pentecostalism is distinguished "by a pattern of enthusiastic worship" (Robbins 2004: 120).

<sup>9</sup> The literature shows that most female headed congregations are urban, African-American or multiethnic, as in the case with Site One (Konicieczny and Chaves 2002).

<sup>10</sup> That is, power held by persons privileged due to their gender, racial or socioeconomic location is understood to be at the expense of marginalized individuals in society.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Calvary Assembly of God Church in Toledo, OH held a \$3.5 million mortgage (since 1984) that called for a \$41,000 monthly payment (The Blade - McClatchy-Tribune Information Services via COMTEX).

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