

“IF GOD IS FOR US, WHO CAN BE AGAINST US”
An Analysis of the Black Church, Political Engagement, and Black College Students

by
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ABSTRACT

African-American millennials seem to have distanced the movement for Black Lives Matter away from the Black Christian church. The movement of Black Lives Matter does not have one leader or leadership group, which has many critics wondering why the group will not use the Black church as a political tool similar to the youth of the Civil Rights Movement. This study examines how the black church is responds to African-American youth and young adult activism. The research provides insight on how African-American millennials believe their new ideologies, political socialization and social identity have pushed the Black church away from the frontlines of the movement, and how Black church leaders impact students' participation in social activism. Using a survey titled "Civic Engagement Among College-Age Young People in Middle Tennessee," I surveyed two hundred and fifty college-aged African-American students from three Middle Tennessee Universities (Fisk University, Tennessee State University, and Middle Tennessee State University) about their relationship with the church and their attitudes toward the Black church's involvement with the Black Lives Matter movement. The results revealed that students are influenced by their ministers' beliefs and messages. For example, 68.5% of the students whose church leaders showed intense support for the movement for Black Lives Matter said that relations between local police forces and minorities in communities around the country would get worse or stay the same in the next year. Furthermore, the study revealed that students supported and participated in the Black Lives Matter movement when their minister showed overwhelming support for the movement.

INTRODUCTION

*Wouldn't you know
We been hurt, been down before
N---a, when our pride was low
Lookin' at the world like, "Where do we go?"
N---a, and we hate po-po
Wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho'
N---a, I'm at the preacher's door
My knees gettin' weak, and my gun might blow
But we gon' be alright
-Kendrick Lamar "Alright"*

The verses of rapper Kendrick Lamar's "*Alright*" fills the air and energizes young blacks to protest for their rights. Chants of "We gon' be alright" pumps into the blood of the millennials as they enter into the next mile of their march or hit the next hour of a die-in, an act of lying on the floor to symbolize the death of unarmed African Americans. Older black commentators of the movement do not engage the music with the same enthusiasm. Reverend Barbara Reynolds, an ordained minister and Civil Rights Movement activist and journalist, had referred to the track by a 32-year-old African American pastor after asking about music that inspires the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) protesters. She insisted:

I was expecting it to be as uplifting as “*We Shall Overcome*.” I was terribly disappointed. The beat was too harsh; the lyrics were nasty and misogynistic. The song was a staunch reminder of the generation gap that afflicts civil rights activism, and the struggle it is going to take to overcome it (Reynolds 2015). Reverend Reynold’s inability to connect with one of the most important songs of the movement of Black Lives Matter movement shows the deep divide between church leaders and modern-day protesters. Civil Rights icon and minister, Andrew Young, Jr., made similar comments while challenging the validity of the Black Lives Matter protestors by calling them “unlovable little brats” for their tactics and appearance (Mast 2016). This disconnect between the generations plays a significant role when analyzing why BLM seemed distant from the black church.

This study investigates the withdrawal of the Black Church from the movement for Black Lives Matter by examining the religiosity of contemporary Black college-aged students in comparison to students of the Civil Rights Movement. The transition of the Black church from the front lines of political and social movements to the background began with the megachurch boom in the mid-1990s. The black church transformed from small one-room sanctuaries to multi-million dollar buildings. Theologies of defiance and liberation are no longer broadcast to the thousands of congregants on Sunday. Instead, messages of prosperity and self-empowerment manifest throughout the pulpits. Dr. Kendra Hadiya Barber argues this point by stating, “as racism has become more covert, the ability to organize collectively against it has become increasingly difficult” (Barber, 2011, p. 221). Scholars argue that the unwillingness to highlight racism in its rawest form has caused clergy to shift away from racial justice messages to messages of living debt-

free and with good health and health insurance. As Randall Swain argues, “racial inequality is nevertheless a ubiquitous feature of modern American culture, and Blacks continue to experience limitations on life’s opportunities of race” (Swain 2010, p#). However, the challenge of the Black church to highlight racism and inequities within the American culture is not a modern feature; it has been debated and argued since the founding of the first Black church.

The Black church is not a monolith, and can be defined as, “a safety valve where thwarted desires and emotions may be freely vented” or simply “a symbol of freedom” (Nelsen, 1963; Gadzekpo, 1997). In any definition, the purpose of the Black church was, and is, to give African Americans a community where white supremacy and oppression are muted for several hours a week. The church’s commitment to marginalized black communities rendered itself fertile ground for political organization and mobilization throughout the twentieth century (Frazier & Lincoln, 1975; Barnes, 2005; McDaniel, 2016). Pre-Civil War theology focused on the themes of freedom and resistance. As powerfully contended by Henry Highland Garnet, a Black Presbyterian pastor at the 1843 National Negro Convention, “If you must bleed, let it all come at once-rather die freedmen than live to be slaves. Let your motto be resistance! Resistance! No oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance” (Gadzekpo, 2001, p. 101). Through this message, churches were established and enacted revolts.

The message of freedom and resistance held root throughout the early twentieth century as the freed slaves endured blatant racism and systemic oppression. According to Aldon Morris, “the religious doctrines of the black church provided the ideological framework through which the doctrine of nonviolence was disseminated” (Morris, 1986,

p. 62). As the Civil Right Era blossomed, the message in many pulpits continued to preach resistance and liberation while others shifted from resistance to accommodation. The didactic differences developed through the lived experiences of the clergymen and church leaders. The division allowed for the Civil Rights Movement to be romanticized as having the full support of all Black Churches. The strong religious appearance was promulgated by leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, James Cone, and James Lawson, who shaped their doctrines and civic actions through the pulpit of the church.

In contrast, novel movements like the movement for #BlackLivesMatter do not have clergy as frontline leaders. Instead, leaders like Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou in New York City and Rev. Heber Brown, III in Baltimore, are less visible and play supporting roles of the movement (Brown, 2017, p.9). As racism became more covert and Black prosperity boomed, the messages of the pulpit digressed from the theology of collective resistance and defiance to the theology of prosperity-driven self-empowerment during the late seventies into the twenty-first century (Nelsen, 1975; Gadzekpo, 2001; Barber, 2011; Clardy, 2011). The growth of the black middle class allowed for the shift from theologies of liberation and freedom systems of racial oppression to personal responsibility and financial empowerment. McDaniel describes these different churches as a division between social and prosperity gospel (McDaniel 2016). Prosperity churches are those that focus on a theology of self-empowerment and are closely related to the megachurches across the nation (Barber 2011, Tucker-Worgs 2011, McDaniel 2016). Political churches, or “a church that holds political awareness and activity as salient pieces of its identity,” most often preach the social gospel and a theology of black liberation (McClerking and McDaniel 2005, Barber 2011). The differences between the

two forms of churches – prosperity and accommodation versus resistance and liberation – may be why the movement for Black Lives Matter has trouble recruiting the Black church in the movement. This new “black group consciousness is argued to provide an ideology that drives poor blacks to participate more than poor whites in an effort to influence [change]” (Fitzgerald and Spohn, 2005, p. 1020). However, as overt racism in both Obama’s and Trump’s America reappears in daily life, the black church response has been slow and divided. Many scholars find that the shift of religious leaders to the back of the movement is grounded in the young leaders’ disillusionment with the traditional or respectable politics that many churches now uphold (Swain, 2010; Clardy, 2011; Barber, 2011; McDaniel, 2017).

This study investigates examining the religiosity of contemporary Black college-aged students, especially those prone to participate in social activism. Religiosity, as defined by Nelsen, is “the religious behaviors and attitudes on the part of individuals, and, here, specifically black Americans” (Nelsen, 1971, p. 1). To understand the disillusionment of young leaders, I examine the role of the church regarding the division of social and prosperity churches as argued by scholars McDaniel, Barber and Tucker-Worgs. McDaniel states, “the social gospel... argues that there is a divine mandate to combat inequalities [and] ... the prosperity gospel contends that those who demonstrate strong expressions of faith will receive divine blessing and favor” (McDaniel, 2016, p. 288). The two distinctions are historically grounded in didactic messages of resistance or accommodation in the church (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990; Barnes and Nwosu, 2015; Tucker-Worgs, 2011). Through an assessment of the Black churches’ doctrines, this

research questions whether the church's message is the catalyst of young blacks' declining religiosity and distancing of the activist movements from the church.

In the remainder of the study, I compare the students' religiosity and civic engagement by first examining the differences between the church activism in the Civil Rights movement and the Black Lives Matter movement using the Nashville Sit-Ins of 1960 as a case study. From there, I use original survey data to investigate current students' opinions of religion, activism, and the Black Lives Matter movement. Finally, I will discuss the results and implications of the data regarding how the Black church and novel movements will advance together in the future.

CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND THE BLACK CHURCH

Thoughts of *We Shall Overcome* and images of clergymen walking arm in arm emerge when first thinking about the role of the Black church in the civil rights movement. The black church was not as unified on issues of segregation and voting rights. As W.E.B. Du Bois contends the black church "are of two minds" (DuBois, as cited in Frazier and Lincoln, 1975). The two minds or double consciousness, in this study's context, refers to question of resistance or accommodation. Scholars like Frazier believe that the role of the black church in the movement was romanticized (Frazier and Lincoln, 1975). However, this contention does not account for the basic structural framework and financial backing that the church provided during the early years of the movement. Gadzekpo (2001) finds that "the black church was instrumental in developing those leadership qualities through a fervent commitment to the community among

African Americans” (p. 103). The leadership in the church also helped to disseminate the theology of nonviolence, which was an integral part of the demonstrations. As Calhoun-Brown contends, “the message and meaning of nonviolence were constructed by the black church to support individual and collective action... [and] resonate so strongly in African-American churches was because it related consistently to the oppositional civic culture that the church cultivated” (Calhoun-Brown, 2000, p. 173). This religious message of nonviolence gave biblical guidance of how to overcome oppressors without returning their violent behavior. Nonviolent methods were integral to why a church would or would not support mobilizing of congregants for civil rights. The church had a pivotal role in the movement and became ground zero in the mobilization efforts for civil rights by relying on students and young adults. Next, I will examine the role of ministers and student participant’s in the church and the civil right movement. To better understand the role of the Southern Black church in the movement, I will use the Nashville 1960 Sit-In movement as a case study for this research. I will investigate who was in the protests, and the messages and tactics churches used to mobilize and invigorate students.

Participation

According to scholar Aldon Morris, “Students are ideal participants in protests activities... students have free time and boundless energy to pursue causes they considered worthwhile and imperative” (Morris, 1981, p. 196). African American students who protested in movements usually did not have outside responsibilities that would remove their focus from the movement. However, not all African American

students decided to join the sit-ins, considered as a militant action. In a 2008 study by Michael Biggs, he predicted participation in sit-in protests by examining a 1962 survey of black college students in the South. His question of the role of how often a student frequents church affect his or her willingness to join the protest was surprising. Biggs (2008) found that “students who frequently attended church were less likely to protest, yet in the presence of the Southern Christian Leadership Council activist churches, students were more likely to protest (p.327). As Morris argues, the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) “served as the decentralized political arm of the black church” (Morris, as cited in Calhoun-Brown, 2000).

Without a political arm within a church, many black churches did not engage in the mobilization efforts. Biggs gives two explanations for this phenomenon. First, “frequent attendance at church may have reduced a student’s structural availability” (2008, p. 328). The student no longer was free to engage in political mobilization efforts as is the focus was on the betterment of the church. Secondly, “devout Christians may have looked less favorably on confrontational protests” (Biggs, 2008, p. 330). Leaders of the National Baptist Convention, the largest convention of black denominations, were known for calling the movement too militant and estimated that nearly 90% of preachers “shunned the activity of SCLC” (Morris, 1981; Calhoun-Brown, 2000; Biggs, 2008). The student participants were often student leaders, and involved in outside organization groups as well as activist churches. The activist churches taught parishioners to challenge injustices and actively work to lessen inequalities outside of the church (Frazier and Lincoln, 1975; Morris, 1981; Calhoun-Brown, 2000; Fitzgerald and Spohn, 2005). When examining the Nashville 1960’s Sit-In Movement, the role of militant churches is

integral in the organization and funding of the student protesters to the various sit-in locations.

Nashville Sit-In Movement

The Nashville Sit-Ins originated within the walls of First Baptist Church led by Reverend Kelley Miller Smith. Reverend Smith and his congregation were a part of the Nashville Christian Leadership Council, an affiliate of the Southern Christian Leadership Council. Morris found that the “NCLC was rooted in the black church and college communities of Nashville” (Morris, 1984, p.175). Reverend Smith, a young minister and local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People president, opened his doors on Sunday evenings for students and community members to tackle issues of segregation and overall inequalities (Houston, 2012). Students from Historically Black Colleges and Universities such as Tennessee State University, Fisk University, American Baptist College, and Meharry Medical School were among those involved in the recruitment and organization of NCLC (Morris 1981, 1981). Future civil rights leaders like John Lewis and Diane Nash Bevel were among the students who chose to participate in nonviolence workshops led by activist black churches throughout Nashville; although the space was dominated by men. Morris (1981) writes, “The major organizational tasks were performed in the church which served as the coordinating unit of the local movement, rather than on the campuses.” The students and ministers conducted a weekly mass meeting, which was a combination of nonviolence workshops and bible studies.

The ability to organize the movement of the students and the church leaders allowed for the success of the sit-ins. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called the Nashville sit-ins “the best- organized and most disciplined in our Southland today” (Houston, 2012, p. 116). Although there were internal challenges, the Nashville sit-ins show how the collaborative work of the college student and the black church could not have had a more significant impact than if the two worked alone. This case study gives insight into the fundamental work and practices of college students in Middle Tennessee during the civil rights movement.

THE MODERN BLACK CHURCH AND THE MOVEMENT FOR BLACK LIVES

Social conditions for African Americans have greatly advanced in the last fifty years. As a result, the black church transformed to meet the needs of the worshipers. Barber (2011) argues, “the growth of the black middle class and their flight to the suburbs have...created a class divide in black churches between poor and working-class blacks” (p. 220). The class divide caused for many churches to emphasize on the prosperity gospels. This theology focused on a theology of self-empowerment which, “has become increasingly popular among middle-class blacks” (Barber, 2011, p. 223). Tucker-Worgs finds that this theology is favored by middle-class worshippers because it finds poverty and unfortunate situations as a curse instead of a natural occurrence (Barber, 2011; Tucker-Worgs, 2011; McDaniel, 2016). This theology discourages public engagement as “those who suffer from it and who are poor...are afflicted with mental and spiritual poverty” (Tucker-Worgs, 2011, p. 99). Within this framework, covert racial issues like

housing and education disparities are a result of the person's inability to put faith in God to change their social condition. This spiritual bootstrap theology reduces the willingness to promote social justice from the pulpit. Smith (2006) argues that with this theology, the minister is saying, "Don't waste your time with protest marches. Put more energy into learning about protective growth investment or trying to start a business" (p. 32). Over time, this message of individual over community allows for engagement into race and political to become less likely within the prosperity church.

In contrast, the social gospel, as earlier defined, "contends that those who demonstrate strong expressions of faith will receive divine blessings and favor." (McDaniel, 2016, p. 723). Churches within this framework are more likely to promote theologies of Black liberation and collective racial identities. In turn, the church becomes political through the pulpit. McClerking and McDaniel (2008) defines these political churches as "a church that holds political awareness and activity as salient process of its identity" (p. 21). The core values of these churches are equality and community instead of individualism and wealth (Barber, 2011; McDaniel, 2016). Scholar Reese, et al. contends "hearing politicizing messages or a theology of black liberation serves a radicalizing force for black churchgoers" (Reese et al., as cited in Barber, 2011, p. 221). Social gospel churches are more likely to promote protesting, boycotts, and overall civic engagement on racial issues.

Churches of this kind are not as widespread or boast high membership as those that promote a prosperity gospel. Thus, there becomes a disconnect with the church and its relationship with the neighboring community. Theoretically, if a community is filled with churches promoting prosperity gospel then there will be little engagement by the

church on racialized issues affecting the community (Fitzgerald and Spohn, 2005; Barber, 2011). This seems to be the case when examining the Black church's response to the movement for Black Lives Matter.

Participation

The Black Lives Matter movement does not have core leaders; instead, it is a conglomerate of groups ranging from the hundreds of independent Black Lives Matter organizations to anti-fascist and anti-capitalism interest groups. The movement should not be confused with the Black Lives Matter Global Network organization, which began in 2013 as response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's killing, George Zimmerman. The organization now boasts twenty-one chapters in eleven states and Canada. However, the movement for Black Lives Matter shaped after the fatal shooting of unarmed black teenager Michael Brown. The organization and the movement share a similar ideology, which condemns white supremacy in all aspects of American life. With this broad objective, "it is more difficult to identify one concern around which black churches can be effectively mobilized," especially the prosperity churches that shy away from messages of race in the pulpit (Barber, 2015, p. 215). The inability for the movement to agree on one overt issue causes many scholars to reason that the church does not know who to support (McDaniel, 2016; Brown, 2017).

Continually, the diverse nature of the movement for Black Lives Matter does not fit within the traditional scope of the Black church. Unlike the Civil Rights Movement, the movement for Black Lives Matter is noticeably female, LGBTQIA+ and resistant to

the respectability politics of the church (Brown, 2017). Ordained minister Rev. Dr. Barbara Reynolds argued in a *Washington Post* editorial that, “the demonstrations are peppered with hate speech, profanity, and guys with sagging pants that show their underwear. Even if the BLM activists aren’t the ones participating in the boorish language and dress, neither are they condemning it.” (Reynolds, 2015, para.4). The nature of the defiant young adults hinders the collaborative bond of church and protestors. Churches upholding respectability over black and brown liberation, again, fall within the prosperity gospel to which millions of Black Americans consume weekly. As stated by Brown, “the Movement for Black Lives ruptures the fear, compromised leadership, and homophobia/ transphobia exhibited by many of the Black ministerial class and much of the traditionally patriarchal Black Church as a whole” (Brown, 2017, p. 16).

METHODOLOGY

This study uses the Civic Engagement Among College-Age Young People in Middle Tennessee survey. The survey samples two hundred and fifty college-age young people to measure their attitudes on a range of issues: police-community relations, Black Lives Matter, and the role of the Black church. The surveys were delivered at Middle Tennessee State University, Tennessee State University, and Fisk University.

The principal investigators (another student and I) collected one hundred surveys at Middle Tennessee State University, an even number of which were at strategic areas: James Union Building, Keathley University Center, the main Student Union, Business and Aerospace Building, and Library. These building are considered high traffic areas

where most students are during the morning hours until midday. We collected twenty surveys in each location. Although the survey focused on black students, we also collected surveys from non-black students at MTSU.

To disseminate the surveys, we asked students to take five to ten minutes to answer the twenty-three questions. We gave the student the survey, let them sit down to fill it out, and then came back around to collect the survey. Any questions could be asked about the questions or answer choices as long as they did not influence a change in results. We cautiously avoided giving the survey to people who were sitting in large groups, more than five in an area. Ideally, the survey was distributed to one out of every five people we came into contact with regardless of their racial/ethnic background and alternating between male and female students without self-selecting.

At the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Tennessee State University and Fisk University), we applied the same methodological concepts as MTSU. At these two campuses, we specifically targeted African American students. We collected the remaining one hundred and fifty surveys at central locations similar to MTSU like the Student Center and cafeterias, while alternating between men and women. To ensure no bias, the surveys were not given to entire groups of students in one area.

The twenty- three question survey was divided into four parts: student demographics, student's political and civic participation, student's opinion on the current political climate and issues related to policing, and finally, the student's religious life. The purpose of examining these four areas are to understand the role of politics in the student's life and the effects of religion on the political behavior of the student.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For the purpose of readability, only the findings reported in this essay are scientifically significant. The demographics of the Middle Tennessee students were diverse and considerably engaged with political events. A majority (90%) of the survey participants identified as black or a person of African descent. Seventy-four percent stated that they believe race relations between blacks and whites in America will always be a problem. As indicated in Table 1, approximately 61% of the students have little or no confidence that police officers treat blacks and whites equally in their cities. Almost three-quarters (74.3%) of college students surveyed in Middle Tennessee stated that they believe race relations between blacks and whites in America will always be a problem. Approximately 61% of the students have little or no confidence that police officers treat blacks and whites equally in their cities. A majority of students also believe that relations between local law enforcement and minorities in communities will either get worse (34.8%) or stay the same (42.9%). With a cynical view of police relations, it is not surprising that about 88% of students surveyed support the movement for Black Lives matter. Forty-one percent of students have participated in high-risk initiatives such as a protest, demonstration, or sit-in in the past two years. A little over 71.4% of students reported a likelihood that they would participate in a protest or demonstration in the next year for a just cause, despite the possibility of it leading to some type of punishment.

Table 1. Political Attitudes and Views

	Race Relations Between Blacks and Whites in America (%)
Always will be a problem	74.3
Solutions will eventually be worked out/ don't know	25.7
	Police Equal Treatment of Blacks and Whites in Your City
Confidence	32.9
Little or no confidence	67.1
	Relations Between Local Police Forces and Minority Communities
Will get worse	34.8
Will get better	22.4
Will stay the same	42.9
	Support for #BlackLivesMatter
Support	87.4
Oppose	6.3
Have not heard enough/Do not know	6.3

Source: Survey of Civic Engagement Among College-Age Young People in Middle Tennessee, N=210.

Regarding religion, 36.1% of college students surveyed attend church on a very frequently (several times a week to once a week) compared to 45.1% of students who do not attend church frequently (few times a month, a few times a year, and never). With nearly 80% of Middle Tennessee students found that religion was very important to somewhat important in social and political life. Although a majority of students did not attend church services frequently, approximately 64% of the surveyed students believe that their church leaders strongly or somewhat supported the movement for Black Lives

Matter. Continually, a majority of students (49%) did not know of any churches that have hosted a meeting or conversation about policing and criminal justice issues. The results show that religion and politics have a relationship between each other. This aligns with the research of scholars like McDaniel and Tucker-Worgs, who both argue that the church plays a strong role in a person's political opinion and behavior.

Using cross tabulations¹, I found significant relationships between church attendance and race relations between the local police force and the community. Table 2 representing students who very frequently attended church (more than once a week to once a week) found that relations between local police forces and minorities in communities around the country would get worse or stay the same in the next year (71.0%). Similarly, students who infrequently attended church indicated that relations would get worse or stay the same at a greater rate than those with frequent attendance (82.5%). The pessimism is unexpected among the frequent attendees as religious people are assumed to have more hope or optimism for the future. The results do not help indicate whether or not the influence of the church's message shape these opinions.

¹ Data examined in Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 37 software

Table 2. *Cross tabulation of church attendance and relations between local police and minorities*

		Relations Between Local Police Forces and Minorities in Communities (%)		Total
		Get Better	Get Worse or Stay the Same	
CHURCH ATTENDANCE	Very frequent	29.0	71.0	100
	Not frequent to Poor	17.5	82.5	100

Source: Survey of Civic Engagement Among College-Age Young People in Middle Tennessee, N=210.

In Table 3, a majority of students (68.5%) whose church leaders showed intense support for the movement for Black Lives Matter believed that relations between local police forces and minorities in communities around the country would get worse or stay the same in the next year. Similarly, students whose church leaders did not show intense support for the movement for Black Lives Matter said that relations between local police forces and minorities in communities around the country would get worse or stay the same in the next year at a higher rate (82.5%). This relationship may be caused by the theology that is preached within the pulpit. As McDaniel contends, the social gospel finds the those who “demonstrate strong expressions of faith will receive divine blessings and favor” (McDaniel, 2016, p. 723). The optimism could be related to an activist minister’s belief that through activism a blessing of better community relations can be achieved.

TABLE 3. *Cross tabulation of church leaders supports of the movement for Black Lives Matter and relations between local police and minorities*

		Will Relations Between Local Police Forces and Minorities in Communities Will Get Better, Get Worse, Or Stay About The Same?		Total
		(%)		
		Get Better	Get Worse or Stay The Same	
Church Leaders Support of BLM	Intense	31.5	68.5	34.8
	Support			
	Other	17.5	82.5	65.2

Source: Survey of Civic Engagement Among College-Age Young People in Middle Tennessee, N=210.

Next, I examined Black church leaders' support of the movement for Black Lives Matter. The analysis used "intense" support and "general" support to distinguish the extent to which the leader, showed support for BLM. Using this separation, we found that there were still moments where both measurements showed significance.

Table 4 shows a majority (71.8%) of students whose church leaders showed an intense support for the movement for Black Lives Matter were more likely to participate in civic actions like protesting that may result in punishments. Known punishments or reprisals refer to repercussions of protesting like parental disapproval, arrests, pepper spraying, etc. When church leaders did show intense support, students were divided on their likelihood to participate with known reprisals at a 56.9% to 43.1% in favor of likely to participate. With general support versus non-support, there was a slight difference with

63.7% of students were likely to participate in known punishments or reprisals compared to 32.7% were not likely or did not know.

TABLE 4. *Cross Tabulation of Church Leaders Support of The Movement for Black Lives Matter and Participation in High-Risk Civic Engagement*

		How Likely Are You to Participate in A Protest or Demonstration If It May Lead to Some Type Of Punishment? (%)		Total
		Likely	Not Likely or Don't Know	
Church Leaders Support of BLM	Intense support	31.5	68.5	100
	Support	67.3	32.7	100
	Non-support	45.1	54.9	100

Source: Survey of Civic Engagement Among College-Age Young People in Middle Tennessee, N=210.

Furthermore, Table 5 shows 82.2% of students whose church leader had an intense support for the movement for Black Lives Matter said that race relations will always be a problem in the United States at a .056 significance, while only 17.8% believed there may be a solution or did not know. When evaluating for general support versus nonsupport of the Black Lives Matter movement, there was not a significant division. A little over seventy-seven percent found that race relations will always be a

problem and 22.6% believed there may be a solution or did not know at a .072 significance. This indicates a deep pessimism about race relations that may be extended from the pulpit to the congregation if the leader actively promotes the movement. There is also an overall pessimism about race relations in Middle Tennessee throughout the students.

TABLE 5. *Cross Tabulation of Church Leaders Support of The Movement for Black Lives Matter and Race Relations in the United States*

		Do You Think Race Relations Between Blacks And Whites Will Always Be A Problem For The United States, Or That A Solution Will Be Eventually Worked Out? (%)		Total
		Always a Problem	Solution or Don't Know	
Church Leaders Support of BLM	Intense Support	82.2	17.8	100.0
	Support	77.4	22.6	100.0
	Non-Support	64.7	35.3	100.0

Source: Survey of Civic Engagement Among College-Age Young People in Middle Tennessee, N=210.

Table 6 shows that 91.7% of students strongly supported BLM if their church leaders showed intense support for the movement. Similarly, 75.2% of students showed strong support for BLM if their church leaders showed some support for the movement; however, only 52% of students indicated strong support for BLM when their church leaders did not support the movement for Black Lives Matter. This follows closely with scholars' research on how the political attitudes of church leaders influence the views of their congregation (Barber, 2011; Tucker-Worgs, 2011; McDaniel, 2016). The more politically engaged the church leader is the more politically engaged the student congregant is likely to be. Both tests proved highly significant with p-values less than .001.

TABLE 6. *Cross Tabulation of Church Leaders Support of The Movement for Black Lives Matter and Student Support of the Movement for Black Lives Matter*

		Support For The Movement Called #BlackLivesMatter (%)		Total
		Strong Support	Other	
Church Leaders Support of BLM	Intense Support	91.7	8.3	100.0
	Support	75.2	24.8	100.0
	Non-Support	52.0	48.0	100.0

Source: Survey of Civic Engagement Among College-Age Young People in Middle Tennessee, N=210.

Table 7 examines whether church leaders with a general support of BLM influence students' participation in protest, demonstration, sit-in or related activities. We found that 44.7% participated if their church leader showed support. A strong majority of students (70.6%) did not participate when their church leader did not support the movement for Black Lives Matter. This again shows the importance of how church leaders' political attitudes affect students' participation in social movements.

TABLE 7. *Cross Tabulation of Church Leaders Support of The Movement for Black Lives Matter and Student Participation in Civic Engagement*

		Relations Between Local Police and Minorities (%)		Total
		Get Better	Get Worse Or Stay The Same	
Church Leaders Support of BLM	Support	44.7	55.3	100
	Non-Support/ Don't	29.4	70.6	100
	Know			

Source: Survey of Civic Engagement Among College-Age Young People in Middle Tennessee, N=210.

To better understand the student's belief in the role of religion in social and political life in his or her support of the movement for Black Lives Matter, it is important for us to examine the extent to which the student held this belief. We recoded this into very important and other; relating to our survey terms of "very important" and

“somewhat important” versus “not too important,” “not at all important,” and “Don’t Know.” In Table 8, we found that 79.6% of students who believed religion was very important in political and social life strongly supported the movement for Black Lives Matter compared to 20.4% of students who did not support the movement. The results do not highlight the role of the church leader in the student’s life; however, it shows that the surveyed religious students in Middle Tennessee have liberal leanings. This is not surprising due to a large demographic of the students (85%) having Democratic Party leanings.

TABLE 8. *Cross tabulation of importance of religion in political and social life and student support of Black Lives Matter*

		Support For The Movement Called #BlackLivesMatter (%)		Total
		Strong Support for BLM	other	
Importance of Religion	Very Important	79.6	20.4	100
	Other	69.4	30.6	100

Source: Survey of Civic Engagement Among College-Age Young People in Middle Tennessee, N=210.

The findings of this survey reveal that Middle Tennessee student’s beliefs follow closely to historical nationwide ideologies of race, religion, and civic engagement.

Similar to the conclusions of Swain (2010) and Fitzgerald and Spohn (2005), there is a relationship strong relationship between the church's view of political movements and student congregants' response to the movement. Further, the extent to which the church leader supports the political movement either discourages or encourages the student to act. The church leader holds a strong influence on the student's ideology. For example, students showed pessimism towards the future of race relations and police relations when their church leader showed intense support for the movement for Black Lives Matter. Religion matters when examining the complexities of why students join or participate in actions. These results do not inconclusive solve why leaders of the movement for Black Lives Matter have pushed away from the black church; however, they do show that if the church leader does not advocate for the movement, congregants will not find it necessary to participate. Therefore, one can argue and begin questioning if the black church, through its leadership, is pushing the movement away from the church.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this survey reveal that Middle Tennessee student's beliefs follow closely to historical nation-wide ideologies of race, religion, and civic engagement. Similar to the conclusions of Swain (2010) and Fitzgerald and Spohn (2005), there is a strong relationship between the church's view of political movements and student congregants' response to the movement. Further, the extent to which the church leader supports the political movement either discourages or encourages the student to act. The church leader holds a strong influence on the student's ideology. For example, students

showed pessimism towards the future of race relations and police–community relations when their church leaders showed intense support for the movement for Black Lives Matter. Religion matters when examining the complexities of why students join or participate in actions. These results do not entirely solve why leaders of the movement of BLM have distanced themselves from the black church. However, they do show that if the church leader does not advocate for the movement, congregants will not find it necessary to participate. Therefore, one can argue and begin questioning if the black church, through its leadership, is pushing the movement away from the church.

This research began by questioning whether a decline in student’s religiosity affected the church’s ability to connect with the movement for Black Lives Matter. The survey shows that the political and civic engagement of black college-aged students is, in some ways, influenced by the political ideologies of the church, and more specifically, the church leaders. This result runs opposite to my initial hypothesis. The pulpit, if used politically, causes students to take political stances and act on those emotions. We found that both messages of social and prosperity gospels are promoting a pessimism about current race relations and police and community relations. With this learned cynicism, about half of our surveyed students are more likely to participate in civic engagement activities that push for change. The message of the church’s leader is essential to determining whether or not a religious student will participate in those civic engagements. Black church leaders must realize their power and join the movement to progress racial issues that affect each member of their congregation. The Black church can have a grand impact on the movement for Black Lives Matter if, and when, they mobilize the youth in their congregations.

APPENDIX A

Middle Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board Informed Consent Document for Interviews

Principal Investigators: Jessica Shotwell and Dr. Sekou M. Franklin

Study Title: Civic Engagement Among College-Age Young People in Middle Tennessee

Name of participant: _____ Age (Optional):

The following information is provided to inform you about your participation in the project titled: *Civic Engagement Among College-Age Young People in Middle Tennessee*. Please read this form carefully and feel free to ask any questions you may have about the study and the information given below. You will be given an opportunity to ask questions, and your questions will be answered. Also, you will be given a copy of this consent form. Your participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. Also, there is no compensation for participating in this research.

You are being asked to participate in this study because of your expert knowledge about issues pertaining to social activism and civic engagement among college-age young people in Middle Tennessee. Participation includes interviews that document your activism. The interviews will be audio taped with each interview lasting one hour. You may get emotional when sharing your experiences. Thus, we can pause to rest at any time during the interview or stop if you choose to do so, and you can refuse to answer any questions that might be deemed as overly sensitive or harmful.

The data gathered in this study, which include interviews, are not confidential with respect to your personal identity unless you specify otherwise. When this material becomes available, it may be read, quoted, or cited from and disseminated for educational and scholarly purposes. Otherwise, there are no anticipated risks associated with this research. In fact, your input is greatly needed in assessing different viewpoints about civic engagement in Tennessee. And, an anticipated benefit of your participation in this research is that you will help researchers understand the social activism, advocacy, and grassroots lobbying of young people in Tennessee.

Finally, you can receive a copy of the interview or transcripts of the interview per your request. Further, all interviews will be stored in the Department of Political Science at MTSU, Peck Hall 246. Your information may also be shared with the MTSU Institutional Review Board, the Office of Human Research Protections, if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.

If you should have any questions about this interview please feel free to contact me or my faculty advisor at: Jessica Shotwell, jms2df@mtmail.mtsu.edu, 901-653-8556 or Dr. Sekou

Franklin, 1301 East Main Street, P.O. Box 29, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, Sekou.Franklin@mtsu.edu, 615-904-8232. For additional information about giving consent or your rights as a participant in this interview, please contact the MTSU Office of Compliance at (615) 494-8918.

STATEMENT BY PERSON AGREEING TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS INTERVIEW

I have read this informed consent document and the material contained in it has been explained to me verbally. I understand each part of the document, all my questions have been answered, and I freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this interview.

1. Please circle your racial/ethnic background.

1. Black/African American
2. Afro-Caribbean
3. African
4. Latino/a
5. Asian
6. Native American
7. White
8. Other

2. What is your gender?

1. Female
2. Male
3. Transgender
4. Prefer not to answer

3. Were you born in the United States?

1. Yes
2. No

4. If you answered no to Question #3, please name your country of birth. -

5. How many hours per week do you work?

1. Don't work
2. Part-time
3. Half-time
4. Full-time

Now, I want to ask you a few questions about political and civic participation.

6. Please mark all that you have participated in the past two years as part of a larger effort to lobby a public official or to make a specific political demand. (Please check the appropriate response.)

- ☐ a. Have volunteered and/or served in a political campaign.
- ☐ b. Have participated in an activity sponsored by a social justice or civil rights organization.
- ☐ c. Have attended a city council or school board meeting.
- ☐ d. Have visited congress or a state legislature.
- ☐ e. Have participated in voter registration/education campaign.
- ☐ f. Have participated in a petition drive in support of a public policy.
- ☐ g. Have attended a town hall meeting

7. Do you think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, or an Independent or Other party?

- 1. Democratic
- 2. Independent, But Lean Democrat
- 3. Independent
- 4. Independent, But Lean Republican
- 5. Republican
- 6. Other Party (Specify) _____

8. Have you ever participated in a protest, demonstration, sit-in or related activities in the past two years?

- 1. Yes
- 2. No

9. How likely are you to participate in a protest or demonstration in the next year for a just cause, even if it may lead to some type of punishment (e.g. a citation, arrest, reprimand by your parents, or reprimand by your school? (Please circle one.)

- 1. Very likely
- 2. Somewhat likely
- 3. Somewhat unlikely
- 4. Very unlikely
- 5. Don't Know

10. Did you approve or disapprove of the way Barack Obama handled his job as president?

- 1. Strongly Approve
- 2. Somewhat Approve
- 3. Somewhat Disapprove
- 4. Strongly Disapprove

5. Don't Know

11. Do you think race relations between blacks and whites will always be a problem for the United States, or that a solution will be eventually worked out?

1. Always a problem
2. Solution eventually worked out
3. Don't know

The next set of questions asks about issues related to policing in the United States.

12. How much confidence do you have in police officers in your city to treat blacks and whites equally?

1. A great deal
2. A fair amount
3. Just some
4. Very little

13. Over the course of the next year, do you think relations between local police forces and minorities in communities around the country will get better, get worse, or stay about the same?

1. Get better
2. Get worse
3. Stay the same

The next set of questions pertain to the current political climate

14. Who did you vote for in the November election for president?

1. Hillary Clinton
2. Donald Trump
3. Gary Johnson
4. Jill Stein
5. Evan McMullin
6. Other
7. Did not vote for president
8. Don't know

15. When did you decide you were going to vote?

1. In the last few days before the election
2. In the week before the election
3. In October 2016

4. In September 2016
5. Before then
6. Don't know

16. From what you have heard or read about the movement called #BlackLivesMatter, do you...

1. Strongly support the movement
2. Somewhat support the movement
3. Somewhat oppose the movement
4. Strongly oppose the movement
5. Haven't heard enough about the movement
6. Don't know

Finally, I have just a few more questions about your background.

17. Do you belong to a fraternity/sorority?

1. Yes
2. No

18. How often do you attend religious services?

1. More than once a week
2. Once week
3. A few times a month
4. A few times a year
5. Never

19. In terms of religion and its role in social and political life, do you believe it is:

1. Very important
2. Somewhat important
3. Not too important
4. Not at all important
5. Don't know

20. Based on what you know, have black church leaders supported or opposed the Black Lives Matter movement?

1. Strongly supported
2. Somewhat supported
3. Somewhat opposed
4. Strongly opposed
5. Don't know

21. Finally, in terms of black church and Black Lives Matter, do you know of any churches that have hosted a meeting or conversation about policing and criminal justice issues?

1. Yes
2. No

Just a few more questions

22. When do you expect to graduate?

1. This academic year (2016-2017)
2. 2017-2018
3. 2018-2019
4. 2019-2020
5. After 2020
6. Already graduated

23. What city/county do you consider your permanent home? _____

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