

The National Baptist Convention:
Traditions and Contemporary Challenges

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The National Baptist Convention, USA, Incorporated (NBC) is over a hundred years old. It is the largest Black religious organization in the world with over five million members and thousands of affiliated churches. The NBC reflects the aspirations, contradictions, struggles and culture of the entire African American community. It is a unique denomination because its constituency is composed of a historically oppressed population who has endured two and a half centuries of slavery and three-quarter century of Jim Crow oppression. The legacy of this oppression as well as contemporary racial inequality continues to influence all aspects of the NBC. As a denomination, the NBC cannot be understood outside this social context.

Because of its long history and enormous resources, the NBC is a central institution within the Black community. It has the capacity to generate vast economic resources, influence the outcome of political elections, launch and sustain social change movements and produce cultural innovations. It administers to the inner lives of millions of people troubled by racism and spiritual challenges. Thus, the NBC is an important national force affecting the Black community and the nation. Because the NBC has seldom realized its potential in the eyes of some astute observers, it is often viewed as a sleeping giant. In this essay we address NBC's traditions and contemporary challenges and seek to shed light on whether it is likely to remain relatively dormant or awaken fully and realize its potential.

This study of the NBC is rooted in an organizational, cultural and gender analytic framework. First, we seek to understand the NBC as a formal organization embedded in complex macro and micro social relations. In this connection attention will be paid to NBC's internal, structural and political dynamics and to its organizational environment.

Second, the NBC is a profoundly cultural institution concerned with belief systems, moral matters and interpretive dilemmas. Thus, it has to be confronted as a cultural enterprise. Finally, the NBC is a deeply gendered institution and its gender relations are central to its functioning and will be important in shaping its future. Thus, our efforts to understand the NBC are guided by an analysis of its organizational dynamics, its cultural dimensions and its gender relations.

Before proceeding, we situate the NBC within the context of the other seven major Black religious denominations and briefly describe our methodology. The NBC is by far the largest Black religious denomination given that it is at least three times the size of any other Black denomination. It is a part of the larger Black Baptist community that also encompasses the National Baptist Convention of America and the Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc. The Black Methodist denominations include the African Methodist Episcopal Church, The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. The final Black denomination is the Church of God In Christ. The Black Muslim community is also important in this context giving its growing significance in the Black community. Black Baptist churches are unique in that they function according to the local autonomy principle that grants independence and sovereignty to local congregations. The Black Baptist denominations along with the Church of God In Christ are the most conservative with respect to gender inequality especially as it relates to the ordination of women. With the exception of the Black Muslim faith, these denomination differ little in terms of theology, but they do differ in terms of matters of polity, history and traditions. They all compete for the hearts and souls of Black America.

The data for this study consist of open-ended interviews with NBC leaders and scholars of religion knowledgeable of the Convention as well as organizational documents, participant observation and numerous secondary sources. While the data do not constitute a representative sample, we believe that the diverse data sources enable us to present a balance view of the NBC.

The Autonomy Principle

The power of the NBC rests not at the top of the organization but from below (Washington 1986; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; and Franklin 2000). NBC's power is anchored in its local congregations, local associations and state conventions. The NBC has no power to force individuals, churches, associations or state conventions to join the national denomination. It cannot appoint or ordain local pastors, or determine which churches should form associations, nor can it appoint state presidents. The NBC cannot demand that any of these entities fund the national headquarters. In short, there exists no presiding bishops, elders, or national authorities that can issue authoritative orders to any level outside the National Convention. In the Black Baptist world local congregations are autonomous and reserve supreme power to run their own affairs. This is the principle of local autonomy and each church, local associations and state convention jealously guard it.

The autonomy principle is the regulating guide of the Black Baptist church community. A former General Secretary of the NBC explained that "Baptist churches are independent...we are not connected in the sense that you could talk about the Presbyterian Church, talk about the United Methodist Church. Those are connectional churches. But you have to talk about Baptists churches...So it (power) comes up from the bottom rather than down from the top" (Cooper, Interview). Similarly another NBC pastor explained that the local church is "totally self-

sovereign in its own right; we don't have to answer to any bishop. Nobody can come here and tell me what to do. We can change something in the middle of the stream and can't nobody say nothing to us about it" (Jones, Interview). According to the church scholar Robert Franklin, the NBC is unique precisely because it "represents something quite extraordinary in the history of the evolution of the Black church in America in so far as it represents the coming together of a vast number of independent institutions and local congregations that willingly and voluntarily decided to convene and cooperate together as a national denomination" (Interview, 2000). Similarly, Lincoln and Mamiya wrote that "the church itself, that is, the congregation, is the supreme governing body"(1990: p. 43).

The autonomy principle enables pastors to function as the main instruments of power. The local pastor is the head of his church family. In most instances he is given the latitude to make major decisions and to set the tone theologically and programmatically. While he may share power with a board of trustees or the deacon board, it is the pastor who usually functions as the dominant actor of the local congregation. Although important checks and balances exist, they usually do not prevent the pastor from determining the outcomes of most financial decisions and delegating authority. The pastor is the head of his religious household and retains power much like the classic charismatic leader. Thus, the office of pastor is paramount in the Black Baptist polity and within the Baptist community.

Rise of Local Associations and Conventions

Local associations and state conventions predated the NBC. The slave pastor realized that he and his church exercised limited power as isolated actors. During slavery and the Jim Crow eras, the Black church faced enormous challenges. The oppressive institution of slavery needed to be overthrown and self-help programs were needed for the downtrodden and largely

illiterate Black masses. Additionally, at the heart of the mission of the Black church was the challenge of saving souls for Christ and preparing Black people to live Christian lives so that upon death they would pass into the Kingdom of God. Black church leaders also concerned themselves with the souls and well being of Blacks in the Diaspora, especially in Africa and the Caribbean. They concluded that Black churches should establish foreign mission boards through which Blacks in foreign lands could be lifted out of barbarianism and elevated into modern civilization while simultaneously embracing Christ.

These were daunting tasks that faced the slave church. Nor did they change substantially with the overthrow of slavery. Following slavery, the Jim Crow Order was established ushering in a new system of Black subordination. Lynchings, Jim Crowed public accommodations, excruciating poverty, illiteracy, and a host of other challenges confronted the Black church in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Such problems were too intractable to be solved by individual pastors and churches. A collective response was the only viable option.

During slavery and the early Jim Crow periods, local Black Baptist churches began forming local associations to address their common problems (Washington: 1986). They reasoned that they could become more effective by pooling their resources and increasing their numerical strength by creating local associations that united like-minded churches. During slavery these associated churches addressed issues of education, mutual aid and domestic missions. However, as Washington pointed out, these early associations also functioned as anti-slavery societies (Washington 1986 pp.27-38). Black Baptist associations proliferated during the early years of the Jim Crow regime. Thus, early in their history Black Baptist churches began evolving local associations to pursue the collective goals of an oppressed people. Because these associations were voluntary alliances, they did not violate the principle of congregational

autonomy for local churches were free to associate and disassociate. Having arisen in the slave period and proliferated throughout the Jim Crow period, local associations became a major structural component of the Black Baptist community.

Black Ministers are a mobile group relative to the Black population because of their economic independence and the nature of their profession. During slavery and the Jim Crow period, Black ministers traveled across state and regional lines to share pulpits, attend conferences, and other religious and social gatherings. The associations facilitated these interactions because they encompassed wide geographical areas that often stretched across state lines. As Black ministries solidified these contacts, they began to sense the need to build statewide and even quasi-national organizations. Such organizations provided additional leverage to attack social inequality, to pool resources, to build strong domestic and foreign missions, and to address the needs of the community. During the mid 1800's statewide and regional conventions were organized. These organizations operated according to the autonomy principle at the state and regional levels. These successes revealed that it was possible to build large unifying structures. As a result, state conventions emerged as a major structural unit of the Black Baptist community while the regional conventions sparked the interest to organize a national convention.

Between 1880 and 1893 the Baptist Foreign Mission Convention, the American National Convention, and the National Baptist Educational Convention were organized. While each of these aspired to be the National Convention, regional and political differences prevented them from attaining this goal. Nevertheless, their presence created the foundation on which a national denomination of Black Baptist churches could be built.

Rise and Development of the National Baptist Convention

During the late 1880's discussions pertaining to unification occurred among the leaders of the three conventions (Washington 1986: pp. 184-185; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990 pp. 28-29). They held a meeting in Atlanta, Georgia at the Friendship Baptist Church in 1895 to determine whether a merger was possible. These contentious discussions led to a historic merger. Lincoln and Mamiya captured the historic moment:

“The merger was accomplished at a meeting convened in Atlanta on September 28, 1895, and attended by over 500 delegates and observers. The resulting organization was the National Baptist Convention USA, with subsidiary Foreign Mission, Home Mission, and Education Boards, to which a publishing concern was added in 1897. Rev. E. C. Morris was elected the first president of the New Convention.” (Lincoln and Mamiya: 1990: p. 28).

The birth of the NBC was a culmination of the collective aspirations of Black Baptist clergy. With this new organization they were finally in a position to operate from a national base.

The basic structure of the NBC has not changed in over a century. The NBC encompasses four interconnected structural levels. First is the local church, or congregation, which is its most basic unit. Second are the associations, which are collections of local churches. Third, is the state convention, which is comprised of statewide affiliated churches and local associations. The fourth level is the National Baptist convention, which encompasses affiliated churches, local associations and state conventions. The autonomy principle is institutionalized at each level. Pastor Cooper put it this way:

“Baptist Churches are independent but we agree to associate. We associate in local associations, state conventions in terms of our state, and the national... The reason that we associate is that we might be able to share together or benefit from each other's council in matters of doctrine and in matters of polity that affect us at our local churches, that affect us at our association or state or national... We associate that we might be able to do together things that would be difficult for us to do individually” (Cooper, Interview).

The NBC is often referred to as a “fellowship” among its members to convey the voluntary nature of the national denomination.

Thus the survival and vitality of the National denomination depends on the support of its affiliated bodies. Without that support it could not accomplish its major goals of evangelism, home mission, foreign mission and the production of church literature through its Sunday School Publishing Board. The affiliated organizations provide the NBC with the majority of its finances through membership dues, fund-raising campaigns and registrations at the annual meeting. The elected and appointed leadership of the NBC is drawn from its affiliated organizations. The state conventions have evolved into major centers of power and resources. In 1998 there existed sixty-one state conventions all of which were affiliates of the NBC. No candidate for NBC’s presidency can win without the backing of a majority of state conventions. Most NBC’s presidents have been state presidents because that position provides them with visibility, access to valuable networks and legitimacy. Moreover, state presidents comprise the majority of NBC’s national board members because they set on the board by virtue of their office. A great deal of the funds used to support the national office is raised by state conventions. The state conventions are pivotal sources of power and resources on which the NBC rests.

NBC’s Office of President

The presidency of the NBC is the most powerful office within the Black Baptist community. Thus, the Chairman of NBC’s Foreign Mission Board stated that the president has awesome power because:

“He can appoint a certain number of members at large on the board of directors. In most cases he can influence the elections of state presidents, who become members of the board of directors. He has almost complete control over the finances through the treasurer. He can determine the various

programs, many by bringing them before the board, and unless its terribly objectionable we're gonna give it to him.”
(Walker, Interview.)

Pastor Cooper agreed that the “president is able to nominate all of the other auxiliaries and many of the other leaders of the convention so that’s a great deal of power in terms of patronage because the convention usually accepts the nomination” (Cooper, Interview). Another NBC pastor argued that “the president of the NBC is the leader of the leaders in the African-American Baptist Church... There is no way that we can have this discussion without talking about the absolute authority of the position of president” (Noble, Interview). Another NBC pastor remarked that the presidency “means that you’ve got one hell of a powerful man. You can get things done. Most of the time the president gets things done his way. He’s got power to get money, and he has the power to do what he wants with it” (Jones, Interview).

The NBC presidency allows its occupant to achieve a measure of power in the larger society. A scholar of the Black Church identified the source of this external power when he stated:

“For one thing it has symbolic power. To be part of or leader-of the largest convention then you serve a representative role for whatever it is---4 million, 8 million, whatever the number is-but you serve in that representative role and so therefore just the symbol of that can be translated into cultural capital, political capital, because you can go to the U.S. President and let them know that I represent eight million people, or you can go to a state governor and let them know that I represent eight million people.” (Daniels, Interview).

The president of the NBC is automatically included in the elite leadership of Black America by virtue of the position. Thus, the presidency of the NBC houses internal and external power. As one leader of the convention concluded: “If you’re the leader of 8 1/2 million people, everybody will recognize you automatically. Domestically and afar you are somebody” (Evans, Interview).

The historical absence of a tenure policy has also contributed to the power that individual presidents have amassed. Indeed, historically NBC presidents have served for extraordinarily long periods of time. This practice was evident from the start when the first NBC president, E.C. Morris, served for twenty-eight consecutive years. Its third president, L.K. Williams served for seventeen consecutive years. During the modern era this practice continued when J.H. Jackson was elected in 1953 and served until 1982. T.J. Jemison who served twelve years stepping down only when a tenure rule was established followed Jackson. Such long tenure enhanced the capacity of NBC presidents to become less accountable and to act in a relatively unilateral fashion. Robert Franklin spoke directly to this situation when he stated:

“I think that in the past there has been a kind of laissez-faire attitude in respect to the power of the president...There’s a long history from Lacey Kirk Williams to J.H. Jackson, and through Jemison and so leaders who served long tenures who amassed favors, who are able to reward loyalty, who as ambassadors negotiate with other public and secular powers, especially corporations and the government and received certain benefits through those negotiations and are able to again reward their loyal followers. So there’s the president with a very strong portfolio that has operated. And that’s been the norm in the National Baptist Convention with relatively little checks and balances despite those loose structures that exist that are supposed to exercise some accountability.” (Franklin, interview).

The lack of a tenure rule coupled with minimal accountability created what some refer to as the imperial Presidency. These practices tended to stifle democratic procedures at the highest level of the NBC. They also created room for presidents to become corrupt and to endanger the convention.

Earlier, we argued that the pastor is the main source of power in the Black Baptist church. The typical pastor operates as the patriarch of his church family. He is often able to maneuver around checks and balances to realize his will. All presidents of the NBC have been pastors and they maintain their local pastorates during their presidency. As NBC presidents

they function as the pastors of the largest church of them all-The Convention. They run the convention largely in the same manner as their local church. The members of the convention perceive the president as the pastor of the convention who deserves the latitude and power to administer to this large religious family. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of those to whom the president is accountable are also pastors. Thus, they understand the role of a Baptist pastor and are hesitant to subject the president to strict rules and regulations. Thus, the NBC president generally “gets his way” because of the that is autonomy granted to the pastor.

There are structural limitations and opportunities built into NBC’s presidency and the Black Baptists church that can increase the likelihood that a president will exploit the office. First, the National Baptist Convention does not have a pension plan. The lack of such a plan creates anxiety about one’s financial future and may press the NBC president to use the office to acquire funds for personal security. It also leads them to continue to pastor their local church while serving as president. Thus, the NBC president holds two full-time jobs simultaneously because they refuse to separate themselves from the salary they receive from their local church. The presidency is also a lucrative position because the incumbent is in high demand for speaking engagements that pay considerable honorariums. Thus one can leave the office in a much better financial condition than when he arrived.

In summary, the office of president is central to the functioning of the NBC. In it resides a great deal of power. Candidates campaign extensively to be elected because they realize that the office will provide them with considerable institutional influence and personal power. Because of the enormous discretion given to the office, the president plays a central role in shaping the direction as well as the health of the Convention.

The NBC and the Baptist Vision

The NBC and its affiliated congregations, associations, and state conventions are not held together by structure alone. These enterprises have been developed to produce and disseminate particular religious views. Black Baptist organizational structures, therefore, are energized and given meaning through intense cultural work. These social networks constitute the main sites where Black Baptist engage in continuous and intense activities to realize the goals of their community. Moreover, these sites are also the major historic reservoirs of African American culture. There is a common system of beliefs that drives the NBC and unify the members of the larger community. In general terms, Black Baptists share the basic religious beliefs of the larger Baptist community. Nevertheless, Black Baptists have appropriated these religious beliefs and fashioned them into a unique faith to deal with the distinctive social conditions of African Americans.

A doctrinal consensus exists within the NBC and the Black Baptist community. That consensus is rooted in the Articles of Faith embraced by the larger Baptist community and adopted by the NBC. Consistent with these Articles, Black Baptists believe that the Holy Bible is the Word of God and that it is the supreme standard by which human beings are to be judged; that there is but one living God who encompasses the Trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; that Christ is the son of God who died on the Cross but was raised from the grave and ascended into heaven to reign with his father; that Christ died for the sins of all human beings and in so doing made it possible for all them to be saved from sin through the Grace of God; that in order to be saved one must be baptized; that the duty of a Christian is to live according to God's Word and to spread that word to all corners of the globe; that the pastor has been appointed by God to bring the true word to the people; that God is just, fair and forgiving; that Christ will return to earth and gather all Christians, both living and dead, unto him and take them

to heaven where they will joyfully dwell in paradise with God throughout eternity; and that those, both living and dead, who chose a sinful life will be punished in hell throughout eternity. These are powerful beliefs that unite and inspire Black Baptists. They existed long before the Articles of Faith were enunciated in 1833 but NBC's formal adoption of the Articles provides followers with clear-cut guidelines.

Nevertheless, Black Baptists were destined not to follow the vision in a rote manner. For one thing, these tenets are continuously debated both theologically and practically. Moreover, the Baptist vision had to be refashioned to address the predicament of a subjugated people. The institutions of slavery and Jim Crow created unique conditions for the Black population. They caused Blacks to be viewed and treated as an inferior species of humanity. This oppression prevented Blacks from building viable institutions through which their interests could be pursued. It also caused high Black illiteracy and the lack of opportunities and educational vehicles to reverse these conditions. Thus slavery and Jim Crow generated the need for Blacks to develop the intellectual and material resources required to dismantle these houses of bondage so that freedom could be achieved.

This quest for freedom shaped Black Baptist churches and the NBC. It caused the Black Baptists community to weave a creative vision that guided their theology and religious institutions. To be sure, Blacks emphasized certain aspects of the Holy Scriptures not central to the vision of white Baptists. Black congregants were drawn to the view that God was a God of justice and fairness. They gravitated to the narratives in the Bible that spoke to the Biblical struggles between oppressors and the oppressed. Robert Franklin highlighted this emphasis when he stated that "we as African Americans have tended to think of ourselves as a biblical people, as a people of the Book. In reading the Old Testament we are really reading our story-

the pilgrimage from Exodus, from slavery to freedom” (Interview, 2000). Thus Black Baptists have tended to develop an activist theology that put forth the view that God is concerned with earthly justice. Martin Luther King Jr. emphasized this thrust:

“But a religion true to its nature must also be concerned about man’s social condition...Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion.” (King: 1958 p 36.)

In this view God requires an activism geared toward social change and places Him on the side of those fighting for justice.

This activist interpretation of scriptures has played a key role in the development of the NBC. A central thrust of the Convention is its work to uplift the Black community. Immediately following slavery the NBC began founding and supporting Black schools and colleges (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990, pp 29-30; Thomas, 1999, pp xiv). Its Churches constituted stations along the Underground Railroad. They have also been key sites of mobilization for resistance movements during slavery and the Jim Crow periods (Harding, 1983; Morris, 1993). From the very beginning the Convention has promoted Black literary by establishing a publishing board that supplied churches with religious literature. One of the Conventions’ earliest documents declared that a goal of the denomination was “to encourage our literary men and women, and promote the interest of Baptist literature” (Annual Record 1998). Similarly, from the beginning the Convention positioned itself as the forum through which the overall interests of the Black community could be pursued. Thus, the same document argued that the role of the National Convention would be “to discuss questions pertaining especially to the religious, educational, industrial and social interest of our people...To give an opportunity for the best thinkers and writers to be heard...[and] that, united, we may be more powerful for good

and strengthen our pride in the denomination” (Annual Record 1998, p19). Thus, the NBC developed as an institution that encompassed the political, economic and social aspirations of an oppressed people. Out of necessity the NBC fashioned a theology and a belief system that promoted an activist church concerned with the oppression of African Americans (Paris, 1985).

The NBC has also played an important role in convincing Black people that they were “somebody” despite contrary messages espoused by white supremacy. During slavery Black churches promoted the idea that Blacks were important because they were God’s children. This race consciousness was crystallized in the NBC. Prior to its birth and during its early years, members of the Black Baptist clergy differed over whether a National Convention should exist independent of white Baptists and whether it should conduct business separate from white denominations (Washington: 1986 and Lincoln and Mamiya: 1990). The “separatists” won out over the “integrationists” by arguing that they owed a debt to future generations. E.C. Morris, the first president of the NBC argued that a Baptist Publishing house was necessary because it would provide more “race employment, race development” a bequest to “posterity” and business experience” (quoted in Washington: 1986: p.181). The debt, therefore, consisted of building a legacy of work and independent institutions valuable to future generations.

Thus the NBC developed as an institution imbued with Black consciousness and race pride. It sought to be a shining beacon championing the message that Black people could build their own institutions, produce literary works, erect forums from which the contentious issues of the day could be addressed, advance the freedom agenda and build God’s Kingdom. This sense of Black pride and consciousness is alive in the contemporary NBC. One of the current presidents of the Illinois State Convention put it this way:

“It [NBC] means a heritage of our race, our denomination... I think the most powerful thing is that out of a hundred years existing, we

are still in charge of this one thing that Black people have that we can call ours... Well it's the only thing that white folks can't tell us what to do. It's National Baptists, Black owned, Black ran. We operate it. It's ours from start to finish." (Miller, Interview).

NBC's Foreign Mission Board Chairman registered a similar sentiment declaring that "it is a great source of our history as well as our salvation history of Black people in the United States" (Walker, Interview). The renowned Black Baptists pastor, Gardner Taylor, simply refers to the NBC as the "House of our Fathers" (in Wilmore and Cone: 1979 pp. 263).

Given the historic conditions of Black people, the NBC was left with little choice but to embrace the political striving and ideological tendencies of the African American community. As a result, the NBC is political by nature and is bathed in Black religious nationalism developed by a people seeking a positive sense of self so long denied by the white majority. For believers in the faith and the NBC, a religiously based political view of the world and race consciousness are constitutive parts of what it means to be a member of the Black Baptist family.

The Family Metaphor

The idea of family is a cornerstone metaphor of the Black Baptist community and the NBC. Members of a Black Baptist church view themselves as a church family. Likewise, NBC members view themselves as the family of the National Baptist Convention. This family metaphor has power because it provides the boundary markers of the community and suggests the types of social relationships members should establish internally and externally. It is not surprising that the church family metaphor has developed given the hostile treatment Blacks have received from a white racist society. In many ways the Black church has functioned as a warm nurturing sanctuary where people feel safe and are encouraged to develop their gifts and talents. It is a place where dignity is conferred and where each individual matters. Like a family, the Black church has sought to be the "Balm in Gilead" for Black people.

The concept of “family” conjures up images of deep personal relationships, loyalty among kinship members, obedience to parental authority, trust and nurturance. In America the family concept also generates images of patriarchal authority where the father is the legitimate head of the household. Finally, the family image connotes strict boundaries separating members from outsiders. In fact, “family business “ refers to private activities of family members and to the expectation that outsiders are not to interfere in family matters. The family, therefore, is a tightly knit unit where intense personal relationships are privileged.

African American churches usually perceive themselves as church families. The use of the family metaphor is especially prevalent in the Black Baptist church. One scholar of the Black church spoke to the centrality of the family metaphor when he stated:

“The sort of ecclesiological image that is used often for a Black congregation is that it’s the family of God and we are a church family. The second thing is that with this family metaphor then you [church members] have to try and figure out how do you relate to the power structure. Language of rebellion is used, as rebellion with rebellious teenagers. Languages of the need to follow leadership, sometimes language of obedience is evoked, you need to obey. As this family metaphor sets the norm for behavior, cooperating, following leadership, etc” (Daniels, Interview).

In this imagery the head of the family is the pastor who is almost always a male figure.

Sociologist Cheryl Gilkes refers to this imagery as an “ethic of family hood” that usually relegates the activity of women to a feminine space where influential women are referred to as “mothers” (Gilkes 1997. pp.367-388).

The appropriation of the family metaphor plays an important role in the life of the NBC. It encourages its polity to operate more like a familial form of social organization rather than an impersonal bureaucracy. Power struggles within the NBC are responded to as “family fights” rather than organizational phenomena. It is difficult to hold those in power accountable

according to routine business practices because family logic dictates that they are treated as parental authorities. As Daniels argued, “people feel, sometimes that as the pastor rules or runs the congregation, the president should rule or run the Convention, and that you need to give the president the freedom, the space, to see what he can do, and not try to fight him all the way. Because it is not perceived that the president is a representative image, it is not the image that we have this sharing of power, sort of this democratic model then gets appropriated.” (Daniels, Interview).

The family image mitigates against the establishment of a set of formal procedures to remove an officer-especially the president of the NBC - who fails to execute his duties effectively. One does not remove a father from his family. Moreover, when outsiders attempt to interfere with NBC’s leadership the family metaphor enables insiders to label them as enemies who must be resisted and not allowed to infiltrate the sacred family. That is, the family model instructs insiders that “you don’t leave your family, you don’t desert your family especially during times of crisis. So when a crisis comes up that is when you need to be there, and then when people call for change...they are seen as being disloyal, they are seen as not following leadership” (Daniels, Interview). The Black Baptist belief in the power of grace also supports the family model of social organization in the NBC because, in this view, human beings are inherently sinful and frail. This belief in grace requires that forgiveness be given to a transgressor who repents and pledges to seek the path of righteous. It enables the members of the church family to remain in the fold and to be given another chance to regain trust despite past wrongdoings.

Finally, this family metaphor makes it easier for Black male clergy to transplant patriarchal relations into the churches and the NBC. They argue that the Holy Scriptures

demand that the male head of the church should run God's church like he runs his family. Thus, they adopt the instructions of Timothy that the head of the church "must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way; for if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God's church?" (1st Timothy, 3: 4-5). The family model allows the Convention to have and project a patriarchal face of power. In short, one has to be attuned to the power of the family metaphor for it helps to order the structural and cultural realities of the NBC. As Daniels put it, "there's a host of other images that could be used but the one that dominates the Black Church is that we are a church family...Once that metaphor is used it begins to take over in certain ways" (Daniel, Interview).

Preaching and the NBC

Preaching is the privileged form of communication in Black Baptist Churches and in the NBC. Within these communities preaching is the fine art through which the clergy attempt to connect with the church community. Preaching plays a fundamental role in all aspects of the NBC including its power dynamics, its opportunity structures, and its overall culture. As we argued earlier, the Baptist church emerged to attend to the material and spiritual needs of a collectivity that was largely illiterate and severely oppressed. The denial of educational opportunities during slavery prompted African Americans to develop a rich oral culture. In this context preaching developed as a major Black art form that has been refined down through generations.

Moreover, there are theological and religious reasons why preaching has become so central in the Black Baptist church. Black Baptists believe that the Bible contains the holy words of God. The Bible is referred to as the Word and it is believed that ultimately these Scriptures are the pure truths of God. The preacher is viewed as the instrument appointed by

God through which his words are communicated to believers and sinners alike. The preacher is to study and prepare himself to receive the Word from God. However, once this has been accomplished, the act of preaching is thought to be that moment when God uses the lips, the gestures and the style of the preacher to connect people to his divine word.

Black Baptist preachers are aware of the crucial role that preaching plays in the church and the NBC. One Convention pastor captured the power of Black Baptist preaching when he stated that “preaching is at the very heart of what it means to be a Baptist. In addition, of course that is both our commendation as well as our condemnation, because we should not just be about preaching. But that would be very difficult and, matter of fact, almost impossible... You have to be able to lay down the word” (Francis, Interview: 1999). Another Baptist minister concluded that “you cannot deny that one of the strongest foundations in the Black church across the board is preaching. I don’t care what you preach, if you preach it well enough you’ll have a following” (Smith, Interview). Robert Franklin stated that in the Black Baptist tradition “what’s going on there is that God seems to select spokespersons-Not all of them exceedingly eloquent, some of them with stammering tongues but clearly those who stand before the people and offer as God’s representative, a vision of a better life. So that office of the preacher, the eloquent speaker, has been quite exalted and reified in Black church culture. So folks who have some gifts and some abilities can really exploit that tradition. We privilege the pulpit in the Black Church culture over the priest” (Interview, 2000). Preaching is the focal point of worship and politics in the Black Baptist church and that fact greatly affects the NBC.

The way to attain power in the Black Baptist church is to become a pastor. The way to gain even more power is by becoming an important pastor in the Convention. The ultimate power is gained when one becomes the president of the NBC. That position means that one has

become the leader of the largest Black Baptist community in the world - The National Baptist Convention. The path to becoming a pastor at any of these levels is the ability to preach.

The first leg to a pastorship is receiving a “Call” from God to preach. The “calling” occurs when one has a personal experience with God in which God speaks directly to the individual making him aware that it is God’s wish for him to preach the Gospel. When an individual is considered for a vacant pastor position he delivers a trial sermon to the congregation. If the candidate fails to preach well he is unlikely to be successful. Thus, when Martin Luther King, Jr., was confronted with his trial sermon at the Dexter Avenue Baptists Church in Montgomery, Alabama, he felt the pressure. He wrote that, “I was very conscious that this time I was on trial. How could I best impress the congregation? Since the membership was educated and intelligent, should I attempt to interest it with a display of scholarship? Or should I preach just as I had always done, depending finally on the inspiration of the spirit of God. I decided to follow the latter course” (King 1958 p.17). Preaching, therefore, plays an important role in gaining a pastorship which is the ground floor of power in the Baptist church.

The ability to preach generates visibility and chances for upward mobility at the local, state and national levels. At each level the ability to preach conveys that one has been chosen by God to be a spokesperson. The ability to preach enables one to connect to vast social church networks and to gain legitimacy as one climbs the pastoral ladder. As one pastor declared, “if a guy can’t preach, he can’t reach” (Francis, interview). The overwhelming majority of NBC presidents have been renowned for their preaching ability. Daniels revealed just how important preaching is to winning NBC’s presidency when he stated that, “when you’re running for president and you go to the local circuit-both state conventions, and district, and local churches-when you go on the circuit that’s where people meet you. People don’t really want to hear what

you want to do for the Convention. They're going to invite you there to also deliver a sermon. So if the sermon doesn't go anywhere, then there's no way that they're going to be able to connect with you on that. So it's the power of rhetoric, I think, that is the key" (Daniels, Interview). The ability to preach is paramount in determining who moved up the ladder in the Black Baptist church and who exercises influence in the NBC.

Preaching is critical in the polity and life of the Black Baptist church and the NBC. It is the main device through which charisma is unleashed and the major form of communication that connects pastors and congregations. It is the members of the community that are organized into congregations that determine who will be selected as church pastors and who will obtain major offices in the associations, state conventions, and the National Convention. They do so through voting or acquiescing to the choices placed before them. The selections are heavily determined by how well the candidates are able to win over large numbers through superior preaching.

Preaching and charisma are intertwined in the Black Baptist Church. Weber (1946: pp. 224-229) defined charisma as the "extraordinary quality of a person, regardless of whether this quality is actual, alleged, or presumed." A person who is able to rule over others because of their charisma possesses charismatic authority which refers "to a rule over men...to which the governed submit because of their belief in the extraordinary quality of the specific person" (Weber, 1946). The charismatic leader is one who, because of grace, leads through inspiration and a strong magnetic personality. Thus, the charismatic leader is blessed with unique gifts unavailable to the general population. The highly successful Black Baptist minister acquires charisma largely through the art of preaching.

The preacher exudes such charisma because his followers believe that God has chosen him as the instrument through which his word is to be delivered. That special gift is on display

during the act of preaching. One pastor in the Convention explained that preaching is “that epic moment which the gifts that have been given by God to a particular man all come into focus, all come into perspective; the apex, the moment where people say that [this] truly is the individual that is head and shoulders above the rest. We cannot deny that here is a unique species among ourselves.” It is almost assumed and presumed that the gifts automatically equate the favor of the Lord.” (Noble, Interview). Another leading Convention pastor concurred stating that, “Preaching is words that come from God; God speaks through the Preacher” (Jones, Interview). To be a great charismatic preacher one has to be a virtuoso of this particular art form. As the Illinois State President stated, “It’s not only the Scriptures or what he can say, it’s how he says it and the power behind it” (Miller, Interview).

The charismatic preacher is the figure that successfully connects with the audience by evoking and creatively amplifying the shared vision of the Black Baptists community. As Daniels argued, the great preachers bring the followers into the rhetorical world shared by the community of followers (Daniels, Interview). In that rhetorical world people are able to draw upon messages that resonate with their daily lives. In this regard Pastor Jones stated that “many times people go to church and they’re depressed, they have problems that they can’t find answers to. The preacher don’t know that they got any kind of problems and they just preach, and they leave there relieved because the preacher said something” (Jones, Interview). Preaching, therefore, is the privileged interaction in the Black Baptist church because it resonates with people’s needs and culture. Daniels put this aspect of preaching in perspective stating that “people can testify to their lives being changed by the power of preaching. So that it was through the preaching event that they come to be either converted, or come to a new awareness, or that they saw things in a new way... Within the African American Community “it’s my pastor

said this, my pastor said that.” So that there’s regular quoting of their pastor or regular quoting of some other Black preacher to a higher percentage than they would be quoting their therapist or quoting anybody else-except maybe their mother or father” (Daniels, Interview). Weber (1946) argued that the visions of charismatic leaders have staying power when they are useful to the followers because “the source of these beliefs is the proving of the charismatic quality through miracles, through victories and other successes, that is through the welfare of the governed.” Black Baptist ministers connect to the welfare of the governed through the act of preaching.

The ability to preach plays an important role in whether a pastor will ascend to a top NBC position and whether he will survive in that position. For example, in order to become an NBC president one must form an election team and excel as a campaigner. He must appear before numerous religious organizations including powerful state conventions. But it is the ability to preach at such sites that matters. An Illinois State President explained that when he invites an NBC presidential candidate to the state convention he begins by trying “to read off his resume and they [pastors] get up and say, ‘we don’t need all of that, if you for him, I’ll make the motion right now’. I’m like, well here’s these handouts, but they’re like, ‘we don’t need that’. To try to solidify him, I’ll bring him in at the annual session and say this is the man, because sight goes better than just a name. Now if he can preach, then he’s got everything in there zipped, he just hooked it up” (Miller, Interview). To win office or gain influence in the NBC a pastor needs to master the art of preaching. Thus, in the first quarter of the 20th Century a pastor, Junius Austin, gained considerable influence in the NBC. A biographer concluded that, “Austin was first and foremost an extraordinary preacher. The testimony from friends and foes alike is unanimous: in his day, Austin was one of the three or four greatest preachers of the National Baptist Convention. Frequently people came two to three hours before the service in

order to get a seat. The Church, which held 2,500, was filled two and occasionally three times each Sunday. According to one source, Austin's sermon notes could not be kept untended on the pulpit after the service, or some aspiring preacher was likely to pocket them" (Burkett 1997 p. 317). Preaching is the key to obtaining power and influence in the NBC.

Maintaining power at the pinnacle of the NBC is a challenging ordeal. Internally there are numerous gifted and ambitious preachers who covet the presidency while externally there are forces capable of derailing one's presidency. The astute office holder knows that the ability to maintain office depends in part on his ability to reach believers through preaching. During crises he must fend off rivals through oratory at the pulpit. The Baptist belief in grace is often the rhetorical strategy used at the pulpit by incumbents to neutralize coups and silence rivals.

Daniels explained that:

"the theology of grace...recognizes human frailty and imperfections, human finitude; and [it] brings people into a sort of a rhetorical world where 'I have failed but we all have failed, and so my mistakes and indiscretions are the mistakes and indiscretions of all humanity because of the sin of Adam'. What you're doing is you're going from whatever problems you have with me-then you bring other people into both acknowledge and affirm their own faults-and then end with 'but it's by the grace of God that we are who we are.' And so therefore, people are brought into that story, into that world, and they're with you now-what can they say?" (Daniels, Interview).

Thus, in the heat of a crisis the shrewd preacher mounts the pulpit and fights his battle with the weapons of oratory and charisma. At the heart of this oratorical warfare is the idea of forgiveness.

Baptist preachers are aware of the power of oratory and charisma. Pastor Jones explained that "preaching can get you out of almost as much trouble that you can get into. People will forgive you for stealing money, they'll forgive for adultery...But they'll forgive you for anything, but if you can't preach, if you can't preach you're in trouble" (Jones, Interview).

Joseph Jackson, who served as NBC's president for twenty-nine years, was renowned for utilizing the pulpit to maintain power. Dr. Noble, current pastor of Jackson's historic church, stated that "Dr. Jackson was a tremendous orator; you'll hear many things about him, but you'll never hear anyone say that he couldn't preach. As a matter of fact, there were several elections where organizational coups were afloat, and they were ready to work. And literally the brethren for years said whatever you do not let the brother take the microphone and talk" (Noble, Interview). Noble relates that one coup attempt was working until "they let him mount the pulpit, and after the Sunday morning sermon, that was reversed and they were excommunicated and the right hand of fellowship was rescinded. There's power there, no one can explain it. Like the Bible says, it's through the foolishness of preaching that God has chosen to confound the wise" (Noble, Interview).

Preaching is a central dynamic of the NBC because it shapes considerably the power, culture, and polity of the Convention. It is the main source through which charisma is able to flow and shape the very structure of Black Baptist churches and the NBC. As Lincoln and Mamiya concluded, "from their beginning in the invisible 'institution' of slave religion, African Americans have invested far more authority in the charismatic personality of the preacher than in any organizational forms of bureaucratic hierarchy" (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990 p. 14). This tradition has produced important charismatic leaders including Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jesse Jackson. As we will argue later, it has also produced problems of accountability, inefficiency, and scandals in the NBC.

Above we have attempted to lay bare the cultural underpinnings of the NBC and the Black Baptist community that it reflects. Because worship styles and music are also important components of this cultural world, they will be considered when we analyze the NBC and its

organizational environment. We turn now to the gender and age hierarchies that are deeply embedded in the NBC.

Gender and the NBC

African American men and women have been the architects of the NBC. However, the relationship between men and women in the NBC has been characterized by deep inequality for well over a century. In the NBC men set policy, exercise power, and lead the convention. Women have functioned in vital support roles that enable the NBC to stay afloat and achieve its goals. Without this support system the NBC would not be able to pursue its multiple goals. Yet gender inequality and occupational based sex segregation are built into the very structure of the NBC.

Throughout NBC's history women have constituted its core of infrastructure workers. Lincoln and Mamiya captured the nature of this work:

“women serve in myriad roles in black churches as evangelists, missionaries, stewardesses, deaconesses, lay readers, writers on religious subjects, Sunday school teachers, musicians, choir members and directors, ushers, nurses, custodians, caterers and hostesses for church dinners, secretaries and clerks, counselors, recreation leaders and Directors of vacation Bible Schools” (1990. p.275).

Fundraising is another crucial role that women have performed for the NBC (Higginbotham, 1993; Gordon, 1976). Thus, women have raised the bulk of the money supplied to the NBC's Foreign Mission Board. For example, William Harvey, Executive Secretary of this Board related that while doing work in Malawi West Africa he “found out that five out of ten pregnant women were dying in childbirth and six out of ten babies were dying before they were one year of age if their mother couldn't give them breast milk” (Harvey, Interview). The NBC was challenged to confront this situation because they had a mission located there. A great deal of

resources was needed to address this catastrophe and it was the women who generated them. Harvey recalled that “I led a group of our ladies over there and the women were so impressed with the need. They said what can we do? I said maybe we can start a hospital or clinic. They said that we’ll try to help you raise money, I said alright. We found out that we could build a seventeen bed hospital for one hundred and ninety five thousand dollars...So they gave me the first sixty-five thousand of the one hundred and ninety five thousand dollars it cost and we built the seventeen bed hospital” (Harvey, Interview).

Therefore, women play dominant roles in executing the programs of Black Baptist churches and the NBC. This is true in large part because the sexual division of labor in these institutions funnels women into support work. However, it is also the case demographically because women far out number men in Black Baptist churches and the NBC. Higginbotham (1993: p.166) found that as early as 1916 women constituted “more than 60 percent of the NBC’s membership.” This gender imbalance has increased through time. After documenting this phenomenon in the 1980’s, Lincoln and Mamiya concluded:

“Any casual observer of a Sunday worship service in the typical black church is immediately struck by the predominance of female members. Depending on the congregation, between 66 to 80 percent of its membership is usually composed of women. In our survey of 2,150 churches male membership averaged 30 percent. There are about 2.5 - 3 females to every male member”. (p. 304)

As we will demonstrate, gender segregation and inequality are responsible for women performing support work throughout the infrastructure of the NBC and Black Baptist churches.

Evidence demonstrates that Black women continue to perform largely support roles in the NBC. When the major offices of the NBC are examined it becomes clear that in terms of leadership and power the Convention is a bastion of male patriarchy. In 1998 there were 21

Convention officers, which included the president and vice presidents. A woman filled none of these positions. The Executive Committee consisted of 15 positions and a woman filled only one of those and that was because she served as the president of the Conventions' Women Auxiliary. Men held all the Board positions including the positions of Chairman, Vice Chairman and Secretary. Out of 38 board members at large none were women. The Executive Board consisted of 56 members with only seven held by women because of their position in the Women's Auxiliary and the Usher's and Nurses Department (1998 Annual Report).

The NBC is organized around its major missions, auxiliaries and congresses. These spheres of activity include the Foreign Mission Board, the Home Mission Board, The Sunday Sunday_School Publishing Board, the Evangelism Board, the Congress of Christian Education, The Usher's and Nurses Auxiliary and the Women Auxiliary. There were no women in position of power on NBC's major boards except those segregated along gender lines. This is striking because historically women have been particularly active in the work of foreign and home missions and in evangelism and Christian education. For example, while women constitute the majority of Sunday school teachers, none served on the eleven members Sunday School Publishing Board. The activities of NBC's Usher's and Nurses Auxiliary and the Women's Auxiliary have been viewed and treated as "women's work". Thus, in 1998 19 of 23 board members of the ushers and nurses departments were women including its president. Likewise, women filled all 16 positions on the Women's Auxiliary Board. These data reveal that the NBC is permeated with gender inequality rooted in sex segregation. The Convention is governed largely by one gender - males.

The root causes of NBC's gender hierarchy are apparent. As we argued earlier, the avenue to power in the Black Baptist community is to become a pastor. This avenue is usually

closed to women at the point of entry and in terms of mentoring. Ultimately women are excluded from the pulpit where pastoral power is enshrined.

The overwhelming majority of Black Baptist clergy do not believe that God intended for women to be ordained as pastors. That is, they oppose the ordination of women on scriptural grounds. This is the rationale they give but whether it is the only one or even their main motivation will be discussed shortly. The point here is that this gendered view of ordination is the major barrier erected in the path of women seeking to become preachers and pastors.

Earlier we discussed “the calling” which members of the Black Baptist community view as the personal contact God establishes with an individual whom he wishes to preach his word. The calling is the first rung on the ladder toward a pastorship. Having received the call, the neophyte alerts pastoral authorities of the blessed event with the hope that these elders will set in motion the steps through which one climbs to a pastorship. The next step is the trial sermon where the elders and members of the congregation decide whether the call is authentic because of the preaching ability of the candidate. For the neophyte the event of the “calling” is a time of great stress and uncertainty because even in the best of situations one cannot be sure that the call will be judged as authentic.

Women seldom experience this anxiety because they are almost assured that their claim will be met with skepticism. In fact, women are usually discouraged from pursuing their calling. Jeannette Wilson, an attorney and former leader of a major national civil rights organization, experienced the call to the ministry. She relates the following:

“Certainly women are not given the pastoral option. There’s a glass ceiling; its not even glass, it’s a ceiling that you’re expected to accept and in due season if you faint not, it will change. Even to acknowledge your calling, there are few men who will at least give you normal encouragement but most you can’t even talk to them” (Wilson, Interview).

Wilson pointed out that when women receive the call they usually “go to the pastor and try to share this common experience and would be rejected at that level.”

Gender inequality at this entry point is substantial. The NBC’s president of the Young Pastors and Ministers Department addresses this inequality:

“We would take the testimony of a ten year old boy who say he was called to preach; with no experience, no base, no knowledge and put him up with pride...and say ‘God called him: And take a woman who’s had experience with God, walked With God, integrity with God and say God can’t ever do that...What are we saying?’” (Bland, Interview)

Similarly, after examining the historical record, Black Womanist theologian, Jacqueline Grant, concluded that “in addition to not being granted ordination, the authenticity of ‘the call’ of women was frequently put to the test” (Grant, 1979: p. 425). The result is that many women fail to even consider the ministry as an option.

Mentoring is crucial to landing a pastorate. The neophyte is usually taken under the wings of an experienced pastor and taught the secrets of the trade. One of NBC’s leading pastor spoke to the role of mentoring when he stated, “I love young preachers and the reason I love them so much because I caught so much hell when I was a young preacher...now I’m appreciative of it and if a young preacher comes in here and tells me pastor I’ve been called to preach. Alright, I’ll find a date to let you acknowledge it and preach your trial sermon” (Jones, Interview). This mentor usually informs the candidate that, “if you go to school I’ll help you, if a church becomes vacant I’ll try to get you in there.” However, this mentoring is not available to women because this pastor does not believe God calls them to preach.

The mentoring process also teaches a new round of young male clergy to keep the pastoral doors closed to women. A state president was asked how he would respond to a highly

qualified woman who desired him to serve as her mentor. He replied that “I would tell her she could work under me but at this time our church and this pastor does not support women ministers” (Miller, Interview). Pastor Walker who mentored and licensed over 35 ministers admits that many years ago he licensed a woman to preach but has since reevaluated his position. He stated that “I don’t do that any more nor do I ordain women and there have been women who left this church because they felt a call and they wanted to be ordained, and I sent them to friends of mine who ordain women” (Walker, Interview). When he trains his male mentorees he counsels them “that women are not to be ordained into the pastoral ministry” (Walker, Interview). The women, therefore, are usually excluded from the pastoral mentoring process while men are coached and encouraged to keep the club all male. One pastor recalls that he would have had to pay a steep price at his own ordination if he supported women because, “One of the questions on the ordination was ‘would I ordain a woman preacher?’ All of these old preachers there. So if I would have said yes, I wouldn’t have got my papers” (Miller, Interview).

In many Black Baptist churches women are not allowed at the pulpit. Jacquelyn Grant, a Black theologian, revealed that on one occasion she approached a pulpit to place a tape recorder on the lectern but:

“was stopped by a man who informed me that I could not enter the pulpit area. When I asked why not he directed me to the pastors who told me that women were not permitted in the pulpit.”
(Grant, 1979: p. 426)

Similarly, Jeanette Wilson, an ordained minister related that when she accompanied her pastor to a revival she was reminded of how male ministers prevented women from reaching the pulpit. She recalled that, “when my pastor was taken up to the pulpit the pastor of the church told me to sit down on the ground level” (Wilson, Interview).

Thus, in the NBC and many Black Baptist churches, women are not recognized as pastors and may be blocked physically from entering the pulpit. A leading Pastor of the Convention put it this way:

“Number one, the National Baptist Convention was put together by preachers, men. Women are out of place preaching. Most Baptists...do not recognize women as preachers and pastors; I’m one of them, I don’t recognize them... If a woman head toward my pulpit up there, ushers would be running from every direction... They don’t come up there (to the pulpit). They ain’t got no business up there to do nothing but clean it up. They’re not allowed in the pulpit.”
(Jones, Interview).

These barriers to the pulpit and pastorate function to limit the number of women available to serve as role models. This situation was clearly revealed in an interview with Janet Jamieson who is the Editor of the Baptist Advocate. Below is a portion of that interview:

Jamieson: “I know a lot of Baptists churches do not condone female ministers, do not allow them in their pulpit and things of that nature.” Interviewer: “What’s your church’s stance on that?” Jamieson: They’re not allowed in the pulpit, they’re not recognized”...Interviewer: So you’ve never seen in your pulpit a woman preacher?” Jamieson: “Oh no.” Interviewer: “And how long have you been going to that Church?” Jamieson: “All my life.” Interviewer: So you’re telling me that you have never ever seen a woman stand behind that pulpit in a service and say anything.”
Jamieson: “No” (Jamieson, Interview).

The evidence clearly shows that the NBC is a thoroughly gendered institution. Men wield power while women follow and engage in support work.

Widespread gender inequality in Black Baptist churches and the NBC is rooted in theological views, the family metaphor, and male privilege. There exists a range of views regarding gender within the Black male clergy. The “ultra conservatives” argue that women are not supposed to preach or pastor churches under any circumstances. The “moderates” argue that

as far as they understand the Scriptures, women are not to be pastors although they are open to the possibility if a convincing Scriptural case can be made for gender equality. The “radicals” argue that men and women are equally qualified to preach and pastor. In their view, male clergy are opposed to women pastoring because they wish to protect their own self-interests. In the Black Baptist church and the NBC the ultra conservatives and moderates are clearly the dominant and most powerful groups.

Both conservatives and moderates argue that the Bible and Jesus’ behavior demonstrated that women are not to be ordained as preachers and pastors. They embrace Paul’s view, which states “Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent.” One NBC pastor explained that he is opposed to the ordination of women because, “I take Paul literally, that women ought to be silent in the church...It was critical for me to read the Scriptures for myself to be clear about the distinction that God has made as it relates to their [women] roles” (Francis, Interview). An Illinois State Convention President concurred that, “my stance on it is that I don’t have Scriptural substantiation that women have a calling in the ministry” (Miller, Interview). Another leading Convention pastor spoke clearly about the issue stating that, “you can’t find nothing in the Bible that would substantiate their call. The Lord never even alluded to women leading men, and if you’re going to preach and pastor you’re gonna be in a leadership position so you’ll be leading me - women are not suppose to lead men; read your Bible” (Jones, Interview). Another Illinois State Convention president put it this way, “I can speak for the majority of pastors in the Convention that we do not ascribe to women preachers based on the Bible, nothing else, purely the Bible...We cannot find it in the Bible...We feel that it is a divine call of God directed at men” (Savage, Interview).

The perceived gender relevant behavior of Jesus is also cited as proof that women are unfit for the ministry. That is, some pastors argue that Jesus only appointed men to ministerial positions. Thus, pastor Savage argues that, “Jesus had a lot of women around him but he never called one of them to be his disciples, he had 12...I mean in his circle, there were 12 men” (Savage, Interview). Pastor Miller agreed pointing out that “Spiritually I look back at the New Testament Church which we are a part of. I look at Jesus making his assignments and I look at who he put in leadership; I follow the same trend.” (Miller, Interview). The majority of NBC pastors embrace the view that the Holy Word requires that women not be ordained (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990). They feel that Christ led the way by appointing a male regime to preach the word of God.

This male centered theology has come under attack. Radical theologians, especially Black womanist theologians, argue that there exists Biblical texts which suggest that God does not make gender distinctions. According to this view, Jesus was far more liberal than Paul and He surrounded himself with powerful women who could lay down the word. A basic challenge confronts the conservative male centered theology. Namely, there are Scriptures maintaining that slaves should obey their masters. If Black male clergy believe only in the literal interpretation of the Bible why did they employ religion to attack slavery and racial oppression? As Franklin argues, the critics maintain that they want “to critique 1st Timothy and say we need to argue with that Scripture, just as Black male ministers argued that the writings in Philemon and other places that condone slavery-we certainly critiqued those. How is it that we draw a line when it comes to the issue of gender judgments?” (Franklin, Interview).

These theological debates coupled with women’s demographic strength have led some pastors to entertain the possibility that Scriptures can be interpreted to support gender equality.

As one pastor states, “I guess my problem is I think personally I’m open to it [women pastors]... I would like it to be so; it would be easier for me. I’m having problems with the Scriptures though.” (Hatch, Interview). Pastor Walker reflected this wait-and-see attitude regarding gender when he related that “I truly desire to know what is God’s will and to do it” (Walker, Interview). Thus, the moderates are open to theological debates on the role of women in the ministry. In the meantime, they practice gender exclusion with respect to preaching and pastoring.

The family metaphor directly affects gender inequality in the Black Baptist Church. It is relevant to a contemporary sociological fact. In particular, women head a large percentage of African American families. Such households are often viewed as “broken” and are contrasted unfavorably with the “normal” two-parent household usually “headed” by a father. In the Black church family there are few broken homes because the father is almost always on the throne. Franklin identified the connection between the current state of the Black family and the metaphorical church family when he stated:

“With the kind of fragility of Black families in the post Slavery era, there’s been such a yearning for strong Black male presence that there’s been a kind of diffuse cultural appreciation for African American patriarchy and a lot of people, even women surprisingly, are willing to permit that even if it constricted their own leadership aspirations because we all wanted to restore Black families and restore strong Black fathers and Black men. So I think that family dynamic as a kind of psychosocial dynamic is as significant as the biblical textual issues” (Franklin, Interview).

Thus, in search of Black strength, the religious family “repairs” the frailties of the sociological family but in so doing, helps produce gender inequality in the Black church.

In this case the church family metaphor has generated a life of its own. Gender inequality in the church is avoided because of its perceived negative consequences for the Black community. This view was vividly stated by a Convention pastor when he was

asked whether he would support the idea of female pastors. He stated that:

“I mean I could foresee the time where I could have women standing in the pulpit, that wouldn’t make me no difference. But I mean when it comes to the family, the household of faith, I just don’t see a Scriptural compromise that its O.K. for that family to be represented locally as a dysfunctional family female-headed household.” (Hatch, Interview).

Those pastors who advocate complete gender equality in the Baptist church argue that it is male privilege rather than Scriptures that constitute the major barrier to women becoming pastors. These pastors, who are clearly a minority, support the ordination of women and some have ordained women pastors. They are aware that most male pastors have theological difficulties regarding the ordination of women. However, they maintain that these difficulties are rooted in earthly power structures and vested interests. Pastor Copper made the case that:

“I think beyond that, their objections would be influenced by the same thing that influenced folks who owned slaves, to want to read the Bible in such a way that maintained support for slaves because it’s not in their economic or positional interests to free folks. And so for men to affirm women in ministry creates a situation where they bring another level of competition for pastorates and leadership positions that they don’t have to deal with” (Cooper, Interview).

This position stresses the role of sexism in the Black church.

Clay Evans, an elder statesman within the NBC, identified the role that sexism plays in the Black church. When asked why male clergy resist the ordination of women he replied, “Because they are not used to accepting women in that vein; real macho... You have to rise above sexism.” He added that, “I don’t go about trying to prove it by Scripture, I really don’t; I’m just comfortable about it” (Evans, Interview). When asked how long would it take for

ministers to support women's ordination in the NBC he concluded that "its gonna take us a long time. I did my first one 45 years ago."

In the meantime, the NBC is an overwhelmingly patriarchal institution where men rule over a membership that is predominately female. Reverend Jeanette Wilson, an attorney and civil rights leader, summed up the situation when she stated that, "I have never felt this level of discrimination in any of the professions I had been in my entire life...The ministry is the most oppressive of professions that I have ever been in." (Wilson, Interview).

Age Hierarchy

Elder members largely attend the Annual Meeting of the NBC. This meeting convenes the first week of September during the time when school age children and their parents are usually unable to attend because the dates coincide with the first week of school. The timing of the annual meeting is reflective of the fact that Convention pastors are relatively old. In the view of the young pastors, there is a rigid age hierarchy that prevents them from being heard and making meaningful contributions. Pastor Bland, one of the founders of the recent 'Young Pastors and Ministers Department' related how young people felt alienated from the Convention. When he attended the Annual Meeting he discovered that:

"Most of the people who were on the Convention stage were of great senior years...In that same session that we were being birthed (Young Pastors' Department), the AARP was making a presentation- Association for Retired Persons - and they asked 'all the people in the room, who are retired persons or senior citizens to stand.' It looked like 80% if not 90% of the Convention floor stood. And this was at the Presidents Annual Address so it was very full" (Bland, Interview).

Younger members complain that senior members nestled within a paternalistic hierarchical structure govern the affairs of the denomination.

Young pastors argue that those in NBC's power structures believe that young people should be silent and patient if they wish to ascend the rungs of power. The president of the Illinois State Convention stated that the attitude toward young Pastors in the NBC is that 'you ain't got nothing to say, you don't know nothing!' (Miller, Interview). Another young NBC pastor said that "if you got up and challenged the King's authority in the meeting, you were almost marked forever" (Hatch, Interview). A senior respected NBC pastor agreed that young people may not always get a hearing but added, "I think it would be logical that it takes time to win the confidence and trust of people. You just didn't do it over night. A young fellow may be ever so popular in a certain area- but it takes time to make good wine; yes it does" (Evans, Interview). Thus, in the NBC the rule is that you must come up through the ranks. This age graded hierarchy poses a number of problems. They include concerns about whether the institution allows new ideas to enter through younger generations, whether the NBC will maintain a vibrant culture capable of attracting succeeding generations and whether the Convention will be able to make the transitions required of an institution that is part of a world undergoing a technological revolution.

NBC and Its Environment

All major institutions are situated in complex relationships with other institutions and societal actors. The NBC is no exception, for it must interact with the state, the legal system, the media and financial institutions including corporations and banks. The NBC also interacts with other religious denominations especially other African American denominations and religious bodies. These institutions and organizations, which the Convention must interact, constitute NBC's external environment. Indeed, its environment influences the overall status of the NBC significantly. Most complex organizations interact through routine bureaucratic channels and

they employ skilled professionals who navigate them through their environments. Such institutions operate as organizational actors circumscribed by formal rules of engagement. In contrast, the NBC is a large organization but views itself as a family. This identity affects how the NBC responds to its environment, which became painfully evident during a major public scandal in 1977. An examination of that scandal and its aftermath brings NBC's environment and its internal dynamics into clear focus.

In 1994, the NBC elected Dr. Henry Lyons of St Petersburg, Florida as its new president. This charismatic orator ran on a platform of raising NBC's standards. He was the first president to serve under a tenure rule that required that the president be elected to an initial five-year term followed by another five years if he were reelected. After the second term he would not be eligible to run for another five years. Lyons' supporters and critics agree that he instituted significant and progressive changes in the NBC. He is credited with decreasing NBC's debt initially, increasing democratic participation, reducing the degree of age discrimination and instituting programs designed to address critical problems of the African American community. Because of his charisma and the power of his office, Lyons was given the latitude to pursue his vision of the NBC.

In March of 1999 Lyons resigned from the presidency because of a public scandal that threatened to destroy the NBC. The scandal was of Lyons' own making for he used his NBC office to negotiate bogus deals with corporations seeking to profit from millions of NBC members. These deals generated millions of dollars some of which Lyons used for personal ends. Lyons also pocketed several hundred thousand dollars donated by the Anti Defamation League for the purpose of rebuilding Black churches. Evidence emerged showing Lyons used

funds to finance his own lavish lifestyles and those of several mistresses. He was vigorously investigated and prosecuted by State and Federal officials.

In February of 1999, an all white Florida jury for racketeering and grand theft convicted Lyons on state charges. Initially the Federal Government leveled 54 federal charges against Lyons, which eventually led him to plead guilty to two federal charges of fraud and income tax evasion. On March 17, 1999, Lyons resigned the presidency and was sentenced to jail to serve 5 ½ years for his crimes. The scandal was detrimental to the NBC because it was widely covered in local and national media and debated in religious and secular venues.

NBC's organizational environment was central to the scandal. External Corporations, the legal system and media were all crucial actors in the drama. Corporations (e.g. credit card companies, banks, insurance companies and funeral homes) are especially interested in the NBC and its presidency because of the purchasing potential of NBC's constituency. A high ranking pastor in Lyons administration stated that, "the moment a man gets announced that he is president, all your big corporations go after him and try to get him" (Cooper, Interview). The dominant actor who negotiates with corporations on behalf of the NBC is the president rather than attorneys, accountants, and business specialists. Lyons' General Secretary confirmed that, "the Convention allowed the president latitude to be the president and to pursue the vision that the president had" (Cooper, Interview). As a result, Lyons entered into legally risky deals with corporations where he received millions of dollars that he was left free to distribute as he saw fit. Structurally the office of the president provided Lyons the room to generate money for the Convention. It was the lack of effective checks and balances that enabled Lyons to use funds to support his own shortcomings.

Despite its familial tendencies the NBC is a legal entity that functions within a legal context. State and Federal agencies investigated Lyons vigorously once the allegations surfaced. Vast resources of the state were utilized to ferret out Lyons' secret bank accounts, forged signatures, and distorted information he provided to corporations. A state judge set the tone for Lyons' trial and a state juror was empowered to judge the allegations swirling around the charismatic pastor.

The scandal was good copy for local and national media. The local *St. Petersburg Times* covered the scandal extensively providing a blow-by-blow account of the embarrassing sex and theft allegations. National print media including the *Washington Post* assisted in bringing national attention to the scandal while national television networks competed for an interview with Lyons to expose the sensational scandal. Thus, the *St. Petersburg Times* (March 16, 1999) reported that, "for months, the major networks have angled for interviews with Lyons. Producers from 60 minutes II and Dateline NBC and the Today Show and Barbara Walters all took turns courting Lyons and his legal team." Two days before Lyons pleaded guilty to the federal charges he appeared on CBS' 20/20 Show and confessed that he had disgraced the Black church and the Black community.

The scandal, therefore, reveals that the organizational environment of the NBC mattered a great deal. Corporations created the opportunities for the scandal while the media made it visible for the nation to view. The legal system was the final arbitrator that sealed Lyons' fate and propeled the Convention down an uncharted path. However, NBC's power structure did not surrender voluntarily to the bureaucratic institutions in the NBC's environment. They had a defense all of their own.

Internally the family metaphor provided the lens through which the scandal was understood and Lyons defended. When the details of the scandal emerged the power structure lined up in support of the president. The view emerged among Lyons' supporters that he had acted no differently than his predecessors. That is, Lyons was viewed as a president who entered into lucrative agreements with corporations to defray debts owed by NBC and to sponsor its programs. If in the process he enhanced his own personal finances that was not viewed as out bounds.

The prevailing view of NBC's board and key supporters many of whom had been appointed by the President was that Lyons did not commit any wrongdoings against the Convention. Hence, they passionately supported Lyons and urged him not to resign. As his General Secretary put it:

“The Convention at no point accused Dr. Lyons of any wrongdoing. The Convention never joined forces with the state and clam itself to be a victim of the leadership. In fact, the Convention voted [in] session in Denver that It did not consider itself to be a victim in any way in relationship to leadership” (Cooper, Interview).

Similarly, another convention pastor concluded that he “could not think of anything [Lyons] did under their administration that the previous presidents did not have the authority to do. Lyons is free to broker deals with corporations, and is just as free to richly profit from those deals” (Quoted in National Baptist Homepage). Thus publicly, the elected and appointed leadership stood behind Lyons during the scandal viewing him as the victim rather than the Convention.

The delicate issue of Lyons' involvement with mistresses was viewed as family business of no concern to the Convention or the general public. Pastor Jones summed up this view stating that “my position is I'm a member of the Convention. Now what he did with his personal life is no concern of mine...That was the general opinion of the whole Convention” (Jones, Interview).

Even after he was convicted some NBC leaders maintained that Lyons should remain as NBC president. Lyons' vice president and interim successor, Pastor Cureton, stated that "if he can live with it, I can live with it" (Quoted in National Baptist Homepage).

During the trial supporters argued that Lyons was the victim of a racist white media and a racist justice system. A leading pastor of the convention, E.V. Hill, argued that Lyons was convicted by "an unjust verdict produced by a racist criminal justice system in Pinellas County" (*St. Petersburg Times*, March, 1999). Hill then invoked the family requirements of the metaphor when he stated, "when your brother is in the muck and the mire, you try to drop everything to help" (*St. Petersburg Times*, March 3, 1999). As Daniel argued, critics of Lyons were viewed as disloyal family members. That is, Lyons' attackers were portrayed as hostile white outsiders, which led the president's supporters to call for a closing of the ranks because, "we can't let them tell us what to do. In the sense that this is in house family business and you don't let strangers come into your family and tell you what to do. No, the family needs to decide what we need to do" (Daniels, Interview).

Internally, then, Lyons supporters promoted the view that the scandal was unjust because Lyons' behavior was consistent with presidential authority. Likewise NBC's leadership viewed the behavior of the state and the media as hostile attacks on family sovereignty. This familial way of acting even manifested itself in Lyon's legal defense. An NBC related Homepage stated that:

"Rev. Lyons attorneys posed the defense that the traditions of the Black church gave Lyons an unusually broad range of powers that may seem at odds with larger society... Lyons supporters argued that the black church simply entrusts their leaders with a broad range of powers that is seldom understood by outside institutions" (Religious Movement Homepage: NBC).

The White judge and juror rejected the “special family” defense. The family metaphor could not withstand the power of the state and the glare of the media. Yet, the church family metaphor had not lost all of its appeal for as Lyons was carted to jail the members of his congregation debated his future role at the church. They decided that he would remain in an honorable position at Bethel Metropolitan Baptist Church. A local Lyon supporter, Rev. Manuel Sykes, explained:

“The Church is a family. It is so much more than an organization...The pastor is seen as the father figure of that family, especially when they have been there as long as Lyons has...The work of the pastor is about putting lives back together. When he stumbles or has a problem in his life that is no time to abandon him...”(*St. Petersburg Times*, April 2, 1999).

The Lyons’ scandal constituted a pivotal moment for the NBC forcing both its leadership and lay members to look deep within the Convention in order to chart its future.

Contemporary Challenges

Many challenges face the NBC as it struggles to address persistent problems and recover from the Lyons scandal. In his first annual address, newly elected NBC president, Dr. William Shaw, outlined the problems faced by the NBC following the scandal. After characterizing the scandal as a “mirror moment” Shaw stated:

“And we need to look in the mirror of God’s word and will and when we look there, ours is an unpleasant sight. Behold some of our disfigurements ... This administration inherited debt and litigation that have been staggering, \$900,000 mortgage past due, unpaid bills and accounts in excess of a quarter of a million dollars plus...; another \$100,000 plus through the Congress of Christian Education; more than 5 lawsuits and litigation- that’s not a pleasant picture. Structurally we’ve been a Convention where units have not met and planned together. We’ve had financial systems without

checks and balances, individuals who have treated their part of the Convention as individual fiefdoms, resisting any authority but their own. What we see is not pleasant” (Shaw, Annual Address).

In this concluding section we address major challenges facing the NBC including the threat of religious alternatives, its loose organizational structure and imperial presidency, its barriers to democratic participation, its stifling age hierarchy, its problematic environmental relationships, its relative inability to address the social conditions of African Americans, and its gender inequality.

There are other religious faiths capable of attracting NBC members if this convention fails to satisfy its constituency. This is especially true for other Black religious communities whose core beliefs do not differ fundamentally from those of Black Baptists. NBC’s new president alluded to this threat when he warned that “we grow and have believers birthed who are not fed and do not grow and do not mature, and soon as any strange movement comes by they come to our placed and find ready converts because they don’t know where they are and don’t know what they believe” (Shaw, Annual Address). Most of NBC’s competitors are not strange at all. Indeed, some of them are capable of providing a real alternative to the NBC. This is especially the case if they embrace contemporary music as well as attractive worship styles. Because music and worship style are second only to preaching in the Baptist church, they require examination.

Competition in the religious economy forces institutions to appeal successfully to some segment of the religious market or slide into oblivion (Finke and Stark, 1988; 1992). Recent cultural developments endanger the NBC’s dominant position among African American Christians. For much of the 20th century the Convention has been the largest black denomination and the largest organization of African Americans in existence (Lincoln and

Mamiya, 1990). Most NBC officials proclaim its membership to include over 30,000 churches and around 8.5 million members. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) list that over 30,000 churches, 29,000 clergy, and almost 8 million members are affiliated with the Convention. Because no precise membership data exist, these numbers may inflate NBC's numerical strength. Moreover, the NBC membership may be in a state of decline. During the 1999 annual meeting, Virginia's state President Geoffrey Guns described several challenges to the NBC including negative church-growth in rural areas and the gradual movement toward minimal church growth at large. A recent NBC annual report confirms Guns' contention by listing less than 2600 churches that officially registered with the convention in 1998. Though some argue that official registration is not a prerequisite for convention participation, these low numbers present a formidable challenge to their alleged claim of 30,000 churches.

Religious institutions must be able to adapt to changes in order to remain relevant in the religious economy. Some NBC pastors attribute their decline to the convention's inability to adjust to new developments in the African American religious milieu:

“Historically the convention had a significant role in the lives of Baptist congregates but I think that its role has not changed with time and so it is not relevant to youth and young adults and certainly not to the Baby Boomer generation that I am a part of” (Wilson, Interview).

The church historian David Daniels contended that many NBC churches are locked in a traditional mid-twentieth century church-culture that impedes them from competing with a vibrant neo-Pentecostal style of worship increasingly popular among African American Christians. Churches that are able to adjust are thriving while others are in decline. Daniels explained that:

“Clay Evans moved into some of that [neo-Pentecostal worship style], as opposed to Olivet, Monumental, and Pilgrim who did not, and therefore, Clay Evans sees over a

thousand people on Sunday morning but Olivet, Monumental, and Pilgrim, who used to see thousands of people, if they can see a couple of hundred they're happy." (Daniels, Interview.)

Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) also contended that neo-Pentecostalism in mainline African American churches elicits rapid growth in membership:

“The challenge which neo-Pentecostalism poses for the Black Church is real, and the issue of how to benefit from this potential of church growth and spiritual revitalization without alienating the pillars of normative tradition. . . and without producing a crisis of schism is a challenge most black churches must inevitably address (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990, 388).

This challenge to the NBC is evidenced in a recent movement called the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship, founded by its presiding bishop, Paul Morton. Bishop Morton was a NBC pastor in 1993 when he developed a fellowship of Baptist churches that are sympathetic to a neo-Pentecostal style of worship as opposed to the traditional mode that existed at the NBC annual meetings:

“It began because there has always existed in the Baptist communion those with an appetite for a more spiritual, demonstrative type of worship style. Historically those individuals have been heavily influenced by the Pentecostal tradition and yet have remained within the Baptist communion and in many respects the worship style has been stifled in the Baptist witness so Bishop Morton really tapped into kind of a sleeping giant in terms of the vastness that really wanted to move in that particular direction. (Interview, Lewter.)

More than thirty thousand people attended the first Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship meeting in 1994, and since then, almost a thousand churches have joined the fellowship posing a threat to the NBC who has lost churches to this movement.

The Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship also attracts younger pastors from the NBC that are frustrated by the age hierarchy that thwarts their full participation in positions of leadership in the convention:

Interviewer: Would there ever be an opportunity for a 42 year old like you to take this energy and these ideas on a national level in other traditional black denominations. Bishop Gordon: No. That's why the Full Gospel has come together so I won't have to wait until I get old. The Bible says that I'm supposed to serve God in my youth. I still have enough energy to do many things; I'd rather not have to wait until I'm old." (Interview, Gordon.)

The new fellowship offers young pastors the immediate opportunity to lead as national bishops, regional and state bishops and other positions of influence as opposed to the time consuming process of coming up through the ranks in the NBC.

To thwart the profusion of young pastors defecting with their churches to Bishop Morton's new fellowship was the reason that Lyons formed the Young Pastors and Ministers Department in 1996. Pastor Steve Bland Jr., was elected as president and has led the new auxiliary as a vital force in the convention with a current membership of almost 2100 pastors and ministers. He explained that, "We've been building the convention; bringing people back to the convention that have been either idle, or left, and offering things that will help the convention as a whole" (Interview, Bland). However, the future of the Young Pastors Department is uncertain because it is dependent on the prerogatives of the new President.

Dr. Lyons's administration was responsible for innovative changes but his scandal-filled presidency obscures the real positive contribution that he made to the religious life of the NBC. The crucial question concerning the NBC's survival is whether or not the newly elected president, William Shaw, will continue to provide the necessary innovation for the NBC to be relevant in a changing 21st century religious climate:

“I believe if it turns its back on [change] now, you will see a death like you never thought it would see before because there are too many movements on the horizon now that can easily take its place” (Interview, Bland).

The Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC) is one of the movements on the horizon that competes with the NBC for its market share among African American Christians. A cadre of disgruntled NBC pastors founded the PNBC in 1961 with the goal to organize a more socially active Black Baptist movement in support of Dr. King and the civil rights movement. Their recent appointment of Dr. Hycel Taylor as Chairman of the Resolution Committee is a strong attempt to put the PNBC’s focus back toward its original mission:

“My challenge to them is that they have gone back to being exactly like the National Baptist Convention—they come there and preach and eat and go back home and do nothing. This year we’re trying to put the PNBC back into the course of what it came into being for; mainly, as a religious dimension for social action” (Interview, Taylor).

Although the PNBC’s numerical growth does not pose as serious a threat as the Full Gospel Baptist Movement, its resurgent progressivism may provide the kind of national exposure that could attract younger pastors away from the NBC.

The enormous popularity of independent African American mega-church ministries like that of T.D. Jakes, also pose a fervent threat to NBC’s participation at national meetings. T.D. Jakes is an internationally known pastor and best selling author who conducts nation wide conferences that draw up to 50,000 people. Daniels related that, “Jakes is a phenomenon all by himself; no one has reached his heights. We have not had anyone like Jakes previously” (Interview, Daniels). The Black Muslim movement is also a growing threat to NBC because of its recent attractiveness to segments of the Black religious community.

Such inter-denominational ministries like Jakes' and other rising independent movements not only challenge the vitality of the NBC but they also confirm Gardner C. Taylor's prediction of a diminished role for all denominations in the future:

“I think convention life among blacks and whites is under assault now. American Baptists are having their problems, Southern Baptist are having their problems; we're in a mood where convention life is not nearly as significant as it once was. . . I think conventions will continue for the foreseeable future to have a reduced popularity and attractiveness to people” (Interview, Taylor).

The musicologist Eileen Southern maintains that the NBC's public endorsement was a leading factor contributing to gospel music becoming mainstream in black churches nationwide (Southern, 1997). The early leading gospel stars such as Mahalia Jackson, Sallie Martin, The Ward Singers, Thomas Dorsey, Kenneth Morris, James Cleveland, and numerous quartet groups were Baptists and reached national acclaim by performing at annual meetings. In the 1960's, NBC's dominance in this area steadily declined while black Pentecostals began to dominate gospel music through the 1970s and part of the 1980s:

“The Church of God in Christ, more than any other single denomination has pioneered the creation of contemporary Gospel. It produced such performers as the Hawkins Singers, Andrae Crouch and the Clark Sisters, and their influence has been such that every contemporary gospel choir of whatever church is almost inevitably brushed with elements of Pentecostalism through its music and its performance practices” (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990, 368).

Contemporary gospel music has undergone changes in the past decade with both the NBC and the Church of God in Christ taking a back seat to independent charismatic/Pentecostal churches.

Gospel music has reached an all-time high in popularity because of artists like Kirk Franklin who produced an unprecedented three platinum albums. The Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship, T.D. Jakes, and other independent ministries like Bishop Carlton Pearson's

Azusa Fellowship, appear to be more successful at drawing young adults than the NBC by featuring popular black gospel singers including Fred Hammond, Donnie McClurkin, Karen Clark-Sheard, the Winans family, Yolanda Adams, and other leading artists at their conventions. The NBC must also respond to the changing nature of gospel music or lose younger members to smaller independent movements.

As with secular organizations, religious institutions must adapt to cultural changes to maintain their position in the marketplace. Competing forces like the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship and the rise of neo-Pentecostalism, the resurgent social activism of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, the enormous popularity of independent mega-ministries like T.D. Jakes, and changes in contemporary Gospel, all serve as persistent reminders that the stakes are too high for the NBC not to embrace the necessary changes to remain relevant in a competitive religious economy.

We have produced evidence throughout this essay that a loose form of organizational structure driven by charismatic agency characterizes the NBC. Crucial to this state-of-affairs has been an office of president characterized by unlimited power that is not sufficiently restricted by effective checks and balances. For a century the NBC had no tenure rule, which allowed the majority of its presidents to remain in office well over a decade. As a result the charismatic pastors/president figure has governed the NBC like an imperial Lord. This form of governance has largely ignored the wisdom and counsel of its gigantic board and other leaders. Under this arrangement these talented and influential leaders have usually abdicated their responsibilities under the doctrine that good Baptists follow their leader. Despite the advantages of this form of governance, it has propelled the NBC into fiscal mismanagement, institutional stagnation and crippling scandals.

The leadership whom we interviewed appears ready to institute firm structure into the NBC and reduce the unchecked power of the presidency by introducing a rigorous set of checks and balances. Indeed, NBC's new president has declared that "we've got to have structure, we've begun the process of developing and implementing systems for effective financial functioning...As we look at auxiliaries, and departments, commissions and committee, let us not permit attachment to the status quo to hinder the changes needed to make our convention structurally and programmatically one" (Shaw, Annual Address). Without such structural changes the NBC risk extinction because it will find itself incapable of dealing with the organizational challenges pervasive in the modern world.

As an institution the NBC has not fostered a democratic climate and a high level of democratic participation. In a sense this is a paradox because its autonomy principle has generated a great deal of democracy between congregations, associations, state conventions and the NBC. Yet, because of its loose structure and imperial presidency a form of tyranny from the top has stifled this democracy. Presidential elections seldom occurred because the president was usually declared as the victor following his annual address. Other major positions of the NBC are not subject to a tenure rule. Thus, it is not unusual for major positions to be headed by the same individuals for decades. Moreover, democratic participation in the NBC is also subdued given that women are largely blocked from avenues of power in the Convention.

There are signs that democratic winds are beginning to blow in the NBC. A tenure rule pertaining to the presidency was established shortly before the close of the 20th Century. As a result, the last two presidential elections have been conducted in a relatively democratic manner. The last election following the Lyons' scandal generated a spirited race with the victor winning by a razor thin margin over two other candidates. Moreover, the election itself was conducted

through electronic voting supervised by impartial professionals. Reflecting on this election one NBC pastor concluded that “the election itself had never been that democratic in a couple of generations I don’t think... It’s interesting to see a democratic culture being created among a people and to see the beginning stages of that” (Hatch, Interview). Ironically, winds of change have blown in on the wings of a scandal and a newly instituted tenure rule.

The age hierarchy has detrimental affects on the NBC. The absence of young adults and early middle age people in positions of influence deprives the NBC of important input. Young people have different life experiences and worldviews than older members of the convention. Those views and experiences should be reflected in the life and polity of the NBC. The young people are crucial agents that revitalize and contemporize the music and worship styles of the Convention. If their experiences are not reflected in the NBC, young people will pursue religious alternatives where their voices will be heard. Most importantly, the technological revolutions have not landed squarely with the NBC and Black Baptist churches. Computers providing access to electronic mail and the Internet are not prevalent in Black Baptist settings. The younger generations have grown up in the midst of the super highway and many of them have attained the skills required to navigate within this new frontier. The NBC needs to involve this generation in the life of the Convention in substantive ways so that it can fully undergo the technological transformation required of those institutions that will remain relevant in the 21st Century.

Lyons made an important contribution to the NBC when he embraced the idea to create a Young Pastors and Ministers Department in the Convention. Currently that Department is thriving because young pastors have acquired some important space in the public sphere of the NBC. As pastor Cooper related, the Young Pastor’s Department “provides an opportunity for

young pastors to have their own little convention and their own structure” (Cooper, Interview). However, Cooper warns that this Department could become diversionary because it leaves intact the structure of an age hierarchy structure while soothing the young. It would be in the long-term interests of the NBC to fully embrace its younger members so as to insure its future.

The Lyon’s scandal revealed just how inadequate the NBC was in dealing with its environment. It’s business practices proved archaic in the context of corporate America. Its practice of allowing the president to operate as the sole proprietor of the NBC proved naïve in a world where corporate management teams and legal experts protect the interests of their firms. The NBC’s view that the church operates as a family also proved naïve in an environment where organization and the state operate according to rational legal bureaucratic principles. Structural changes are needed in the NBC if it is to become an effective actor in its environment. Cooper pointed out how the Lyon’s scandal was revealing in this respect when he stated:

“I think it alerts the Convention to the fact that in terms of how it does business and how it promotes itself, that it has to be cognizant of the fact that we are in a governmental and political context where we will not escape scrutiny. And where we will be judged by those standards and if we violate them in significant ways, there will be an effort to impose sanction upon us... We’re going to have to re-evaluate how we function in our local communities; how do we relate to Politicians, how do we relate to economic entities, and we’re going to have to understand that there’s no blessing without responsibilities, there’s no benefit without obligation, and that it’s not always easy to determine who the other ‘Gods’ are that we’re suppose to have” (Cooper, Interview).

A solution to these problems will require that the NBC make some fundamental structural changes where experts rather than charismatic pastors have the technical responsibilities of steering the NBC through its environment. Indeed, segments of NBC’s membership are not

likely to continue to support the Convention if is rocked by additional scandals. NBC's current debt is in part due to the falling off of contributions by the rank and file during the Lyon's scandal. In the absence of effective checks and balances and needed structural changes NBC members may vote with their feet by exiting in droves. In light of the recent Enron catastrophe, it should be clear that highly placed actors left unchecked may yield to temptation and exploit their office. The point is that effective structural mechanisms are needed even in the NBC because all human beings fall short of God's glory. However, the NBC will need to reconcile and assess its structural requirements and its guiding family metaphor. Daniel pointed to this thorny issue when he stated that, "I think that metaphor then hinders some of the other changes that are being done structurally and organizationally... It's just that with this dominant metaphor, it makes it [structural changes] more difficult" (Daniels, Interview). The family metaphor has real value because it reflects the culture and needs of a community that is not fully embraced by the larger society. Because of the positive contributions the church makes to the well being of Black people, it is unlikely that the family metaphor will lose its resonance any time soon. To be an effective environmental actor, however, the NBC will need to address the tension between its identity as a family and its structural needs and make the necessary adjustments.

If the NBC is to be respected, supported, and defended by the Black community it must address its political, economic and social needs more effectively. The Convention has no visible and coherent national program to address the poverty experienced by millions of African Americans. Indeed, each year the Convention dumps approximately 50 million dollars into the economy of the city that host its annual meeting. After a century the NBC does not own a hotel chain or other major business that could contribute to the economic uplift of African Americans. Similarly, while the NBC believes in an "intact" two parent spiritual household it does not have

a national plan to strengthen Black families, many of whom are poor because they are supported by the meager incomes of single women. The NBC has no national plan to counteract the burgeoning prison industry, which incarcerates a disproportionate number of African Americans. Because of its loss of respect in the larger society major politicians have begun to ignore the NBC. Thus, its new president revealed that, “Months ago I invited Vice President Gore and Governor Bush to address this body and be heard by us, not in an entrapping way, but in a mutually enlightening way. Neither candidate replied on paper. Neither put us on their schedule” (Shaw, Annual Address, 2000). He then raised the troubling question of, “Have we been written off?”

NBC churches played a critical role in the Civil Rights Movement but without the support of NBC’s top leadership. The autonomy principle of the Baptist church enabled thousands of churches and pastors to back King’s leadership and follow him into the streets in pursuit of justice and equality. A question now is whether the NBC will engage in creative and innovative social change activities aimed at generating social equality? If the NBC fails to function as a social change agent it may alienate a new generation. A leading pastor of the Progressive National Baptist Convention put this issue squarely on the table when he predicted that:

“But there has to come a new generation of Black ministers who will themselves be new creatures. They will attack the system, even the Black church; they will attack the Black church at the core of itself and will force it to raise new questions about itself... They will ask the question why is it that with all of the things that are happening to us, we sing on Sunday...but nothing seems to change, in fact things are getting worse for us?” So that generation will ask that question and they will do it with anger, disappointment and disillusionment with the Black church” (Hycel Taylor, Interview).

To be salient in the Black community the NBC will have to return to its roots where injustice and inequality were dissected and confronted. But even here the NBC has historically allowed itself to be trapped between an activist stance and an otherworldly orientation that focuses disproportionately on spiritual matters. Contemporary challenges demand that the NBC creatively embrace church activism and spiritual matters so that the vast needs of Black people can be addressed.

Eventually the NBC will have to face the widespread gender inequality institutionalized throughout the Convention. Deep rumbles over gender inequality are apparent to those who listen. The lid over this issue will not remain intact for an eternity. Eventually the NBC will have to answer for its unwillingness to step up to the moral plate and empower women. It is true that similar levels of gender inequality exist within the Catholic Church, the Southern White Baptists Convention, and most religious denominations on earth. However, the NBC has a different calling because it was born out of the need to address the unique problems of a people shackled by the chains of oppression. There were Scriptures in the same Bible Baptists use today that condoned oppression but the NBC critiqued them and struck out on the journey to uplift and free Black people. It is curious, indeed, that the majority of Black male pastors not only refuse to embrace the need to empower women but stand directly in the path to such empowerment. As a result the perspectives of women are not heard from the pulpit. There are over 50,000 pastoral and ministerial positions in the Black Baptist church but women do not have access to them because of gender discrimination in the church and the NBC.

In a classic study of NBC's Women's Auxiliary, Higginbotham (1993) documented the central role that women have played in the NBC historically. Her central argument maintains

that women in the Auxiliary were often leaders who pursued their own goals while fighting racism and sexism simultaneously. While this argument captures important contributions made by NBC women, it fails to reveal the extent to which the Women's Auxiliary has supported male patriarchy in the National Baptist Convention proper. Thus, constitutionally the "Women's Auxiliary operates under the auspices of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. The primary objective of the Auxiliary is to support and supplement the goals and objectives of the Convention" (1998 Annual Report). This body, therefore, is not to lead but to "support and supplement." The current president of the Women's Auxiliary confirmed that its Auxiliary is not to lead when she stated that the men "are our pastors, ... They are our leaders" (*St. Petersburg Times*, September 9, 1999).

The future of NBC's gender inequality is uncertain. There are small minorities of highly visible male pastors who ordain and support women pastors. They constitute important role models of change for those pastors sitting on the fence and for young pastors. However, like "enlightened" slave masters, these role models are reluctant to advocate that their colleagues pick-up the Cross of Women's empowerment. In all likelihood, women will have to revolt in order to change the gender inequality in the NBC and the Black Baptist church. Thus, Franklin argued that "unless there is statistically significant unrest, there is unfortunately no intrinsic engine driving male ministers who are in power to began to change that model"[male domination] (Franklin, Interview). However, because of the numerical superiority women are in a position to force change. As Jeanette Wilson put it, "I mean we could shut down the church on any given Sunday with just a simple "we're not going, y'all run it without us" (Wilson, Interview). It would be in the long-term interests of the NBC to empower women rather than be

confronted with a revolution later. Without such empowerment that revolution will come as surely as did those who overthrew slavery and Jim Crow.

The NBC remains the largest Black religious organization in the world. It has a long and important history in the Black community, the nation, and other parts of the world. It is now challenged to make the necessary change that will enable it to be an important force in the world. Its long history attest to the fact that the NBC has been a survivor. The question now is will the NBC have the courage and foresight to implement positive changes. As NBC's former General Secretary put it "The National Baptist Convention wants to live and so therefore it will do what it has to do in order to maintain life. That means it will have to come to grips with the government, with the cultural ethos, with its own constituency and other constituency...and if it doesn't it will die." (Cooper, Interview). While rumors of NBC's death are greatly exaggerated, to remain relevant and vital the Convention must refashion itself in a manner that will enable it to promote the broad interests of the African American community.

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