

Last Sunday: Using Collaborative Playbuilding to Understand Why Some African Americans Leave the Black Church

James Webb

Abstract

Collaborative playbuilding is an emerging qualitative arts-based research design that is participatory in nature and draws upon the expertise of its research participants to assist with data collection, analysis, and the dissemination of research findings, which includes creating a performance script, rehearsing with actors, and dialoguing with audience members in a post-show talk-back session (Campana, 2005; Norris, 2009). This type of research repositions participants from a passive to a more active state of engagement by placing them at the helm of the research process. Participants are considered to be co-collaborators with the primary research investigator, and they play an active role in the scriptwriting, rehearsal, and public performance of generated data (Norris, 2009). I used collaborative playbuilding as a means to bring together in a dialogic process both current and former long-term members of the Black Church. I engaged the participants, using traditional qualitative methods (e.g. interviews, observations, and a focus group) to investigate their experiences within the Black Church, *and* I asked each participant to assist in crafting the performance script, rehearse with actors, and speak to audience members in a post-show talk-back session with the goal of discovering what motivates some long-term members of Black churches to leave and not return.

Collaborative playbuilding is an emerging qualitative arts-based research design that is participatory in nature and draws upon the expertise of its research participants to assist with data collection, analysis, and the dissemination of research findings, which includes creating a performance script, rehearsing with actors, and dialoguing with audience members in a post-show talk-back session (Campana 2005; Norris 2009). This type of research repositions participants from a passive to a more active state of engagement by placing them at the helm of the research process. The methods employed by collaborative playbuilding are similar to those of performance ethnography in that researchers use interviews, observations, and focus groups to generate data that will be used (mostly verbatim) in a performance script and presented before a live audience. However, collaborative playbuilding is unique in that its design is not simply to report the findings of its research but also to fully involve its participants in that process. Therefore, data generation does not end with the presentation of the play but rather continues with post-show discussions with audiences and participants, causing an overlapping effect in the process of how data is generated, analyzed, and disseminated. Ultimately, there is no definitive claim on the methodology of collaborative playbuilding. Researchers adapt the form to fit the needs of their particular research questions.

In my case, I used collaborative playbuilding as a means to bring together in a dialogic process both current and former long-term members of the Black Church. I engaged the participants, using traditional qualitative methods (e.g. interviews, observations, and a focus group) to investigate their experiences within the Black Church, *and* I asked each participant to assist in crafting the performance script, rehearsing with actors, and speaking to audience members in a post-show talk-back session. In other words, I used theatre as my primary research methodology to raise questions, nurture dialogue, champion the voices of African American churchgoers, and gain greater understanding of their experiences within the institution as I searched to discover the reasons why some long-term members of the Black Church leave the institution and choose not to return.

Introduction

In Ruth Gaines-Shelton's comedic play *The Church Fight* (1925), she uses humor, satire, and allegory to poke fun at the Black Church. In the play, several congregational members gather secretly at a parishioner's home to discuss the removal of their pastor, Parson Procrastinator. Although the members are displeased with his leadership, they are hard-pressed to find a sufficient charge to oust him. There is dissension amongst the ranks. After receiving news that a church fight has ensued to expel him, Parson Procrastinator makes a surprise visit. In his most dominating manner, he dares each of the members to stand up and make their charges known to him face-to-face. One by one, they fearfully back down their claims, and instead, shower him with praise and compliments. After squashing any threat of defiance, Parson Procrastinator calls for a vote. Unanimously, he is invited to keep his post for another year. He leaves the victor, but after he exits, the parishioners adjourn their meeting with a prayer, beseeching God to "direct Parson Procrastinator's feet toward the railroad track" (198).

In Gaines-Shelton's hilarious and creative way, she illuminates a serious yet common problem: the lack of space for open and honest dialogue within the Black Church (Mattis et al. 2004; West 2004; Gillespie 2009). Within her play, church members meet secretly, outside the church, to discuss issues concerning their pastor, which leads me to ask, *why?* It would seem reasonable for members of an organization to meet *within* the institution to address their concerns with their paid leadership. However, within the Black Church, the notion of critical reflection, critical thinking, and critical questioning from congregational members is often frowned upon by church leadership (Gillespie, 2009). Indeed, acts of critical inquiry can be seen as contrary and even threatening to the institution's metaphorical hierarchy, which includes the all-knowing shepherd (the pastor) and the faithful, obedient sheep (the congregation). Thus, many African American churchgoers within the Black Church find that their voices are silenced (Gillespie 2009).

Within my twenty years of active church attendance, I witnessed firsthand two church fights. The first fight occurred in a Missionary Baptist Church in Mississippi, where I grew up as a child. The pastor was accused of infidelity and using church funds to lavish gifts on his alleged mistress. The second fight happened years later when I was an undergraduate in Florida. Some church members were disturbed by their pastor's interpretations of the bible. So, they banded together and signed a petition, outlining their dissatisfaction and desire to discharge him of his pastoral duties. The pastor read the petition, refused to comment, and carried out his duties as

Last Sunday: Using Collaborative Playbuilding to Understand Why Some African Americans Leave the Black Church
James Webb

normal. On the following Sunday, in an act of sheer theatricality, the choir rose from their seats and sang a gospel song, “God’s Tryin’ To Tell You Something.” Noticing the lyrics were aimed directly at him, the pastor resigned. When he left, several church members followed.

What is interesting about these scenarios, both fictional and real, is that within each case an extreme result occurred. There was no middle ground—no real attempt at dialogue. On one end of the spectrum, in Gaines-Shelton’s play, church members chose to silence their voices in the face of their oppressive leader. On the other end of the spectrum, at my former church in Florida, several church members spoke out, signed a petition, and demanded their pastor resign, which resulted in a civil war and a congregational split. In both situations, dominance triumphed over dialogue, and in my opinion, the churches suffered.

The Black Church

The Black Church—which I would define as a church that has Black leaders and serves the needs of a primarily Black congregation—historically has operated as a one-stop institution, catering to the collective needs of its people (Frazier 1963; Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990). From its inception, the Black Church in the United States played a significant role in establishing Black heritage, producing and cultivating Black leaders, and thwarting the dehumanizing effects of slavery, oppression, and racism (Billingsley 1992; Wilmore 1972). It was the only longstanding public institution financed and operated by Blacks, and for centuries, it has served as a life force for the African American community.

However, after Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination on April 4, 1968, Black Church membership began to decline. Florence E. Canada (2004), states that the Black Church “seemed to lack [the] ability and the will to be relevant in relation to the changed social, political, and economic realities of living in an integrated society” (37). She argues that some Blacks became disheartened with the Black Church and replaced their spiritual relationship with the institution with “an increased sensibility to African roots, Islam, or any number of New Age religious movements growing out of a fascination with the East” (37). Canada goes on to suggest that once Blacks began to take advantage of the social and economic gains won from their efforts in the Civil Rights Movement and a new Black middle-class emerged, the Black community began to suffer from a spiritual crisis, resulting in a decline in Black Church membership.

Still, other scholars (Mattis et al. 2004; Gillespie 2009) suggest the reasons underpinning membership decline in Black churches are more varied and complex. In a 2004 study, Jacqueline Mattis et al. surveyed 217 African American men in the Midwest in regards to the Black Church. Ninety-nine of those men indicated that they did not attend church, and in many instances, they attributed their reasons for non-attendance to issues of moral, ethical, and ideological concerns with the church. Most interestingly, many of those men still considered themselves to be “spiritual,” meaning, according to Mattis, these non-churchgoers left the church but continued to believe in and pray to God. Mattis’s research echoes other scholars (Cone 1978; Canada 2004; Gillespie 2009; Miller 2007), highlighting a need for renewed dialogue regarding the appropriate role of religious institutions in society, and the lack of opportunity for attendees and non-attendees of the Black Church to voice their concerns and critiques of the institution. She argues that the critical dialogue lacking within the Black Church is desperately needed if the church is to

Last Sunday: Using Collaborative Playbuilding to Understand Why Some African Americans Leave the Black Church
James Webb

maintain its relevance in a changing society. Still, some scholars (West 2004; Gillespie 2009) are questioning whether or not the Black Church even wants to change and even whether or not the leadership within the Black Church is deliberately complicit in silencing its members' voices. Indeed, Robin Gillespie, in her 2009 study speaks of an internalized "devoicing" of Black Church members by their leaders. She states,

There seems to be an unspoken but real rule in the Black Church that discourages and even forbids critical questioning of topics, concepts, or ideologies that control the basic manner in which people perform life. Parishioners understand this tacit denial of a person's right to question actions of the church leaders because critical questioning could be viewed as disobedient, defiant, and disrespectful. (29–30)

In fact, Gillespie's research, describes a pattern of "devoicing" that has occurred across the centuries. Basing her claims of *voicelessness* amongst church members on interviews she conducted with Black Church leaders in 2009, she makes a compelling claim that the strong-arm of oppression that was once attached to the White slave owner has been culturally passed down to the hegemonic leaders of the Black Church. (This notion speaks to Paulo Freire's (1970) theory that those oppressed can easily take on the characteristics of their oppressors.) Yet, even Gillespie fails to include in her study the narratives that represent the voices of those de-voiced laypersons to which she refers. Thus, with my research, I wanted to utilize methods that placed laypersons at the helm of the research process—positioning them as experts on their own cultural identity.

Performance Ethnography as Research Methodology

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, sociologists have been turning their ethnographic research into performances while performance artists have been turning to ethnographies to create their art (McCall 2000; Vincent 2005). Notable theatre artists, such as Anna Deavere Smith (*Fires in the Mirror* 1992), Moises Kaufman (*The Laramie Project* 2001), and Doug Wright (*I Am My Own Wife* 2004) have brought this genre of performance, often called Ethnodrama, Interview Theatre, Documentary Theatre, and Reality Theatre, to the foreground and garnered much acclaim in the American theatre. Even network television has echoed the power and appeal of this form of drama, creating many reality shows.

Social scientists have turned to Performance Ethnography because as an arts-based methodology, it can profoundly affect researchers, participants, and audience members in several distinct ways: it illuminates and interrogates culture in a manner that broadens a critical dialogue between researchers, performers, participants, and audience members (Denzin and Lincoln 1998); provides a more visually intimate understanding of a particular culture to a broader audience (Conquergood 1991); privileges the voices of its participants (Campana 2005); and carries the potential for emancipatory action (Alexander, Denzin and Lincoln 2005). For example, Brad Vincent's 2005 study used questionnaires and interviews of college-aged gay men to learn about their experiences in elementary, middle, and high school. From these narratives, Vincent crafted a performance script to be used as an educational tool for schoolteachers, counselors, and administrators to better their understanding of how school policies, curriculum, and instruction affect homosexual students. Likewise, University of Toronto professor Tara

Last Sunday: Using Collaborative Playbuilding to Understand Why Some African Americans Leave the Black Church
James Webb

Goldstein (2001) conducted a four-year critical ethnographic study in a Canadian multilingual high school, and used performance ethnography to highlight the social dilemmas of immigrant youths and their Canadian-born classmates in a way that avoided the reproduction of the policies and practices of colonialism and racism her study was designed to challenge. In each example, Vincent and Goldstein championed the voices of their participants and used playwriting and performance as a means of disseminating the findings of their research. Still, in each case, as is common with most performance ethnography studies, research participants discovered that their role within the research process quickly came to an end after their interviews (Campana 205). Yet, in collaborative playbuilding, research participants work in partnership with the primary investigator, collaborating throughout the entire research process.

Collaborative Playbuilding as Research Methodology

In collaborative playbuilding, data is generated by both the primary research investigator and the participants. According to Joe Norris (2009), participants serve as co-collaborators in the research process, breaking the traditional dualistic style of one-on-one interviews and giving preference to a more dialogic encounter where collective storytelling serves as a rich data source. Norris asserts, “Stories beget stories, and as conversations unfold there is a flood of information as one person’s account triggers memories in others” (24). In Norris’s book, *Playbuilding as Qualitative Research: A Participatory Arts-based Approach* (2009), he gives several examples of collaborative playbuilding based on his work at the Canadian Mirror Theatre, where he serves as a director, researcher, and instructor. Through this organization, Norris and his students (whom he refers to as actors/researchers/teachers or A/R/Tors) conduct research and create performances on multiple topics, including bullying, homophobia, sexuality, gambling, substance abuse, and identity as well as teacher-education research on teachers’ relationships with students and other faculty.

In Jillian Campana’s (2005) study, *A Participatory Methodology for Ethnographic Arts-Based Research: Collaborative Playwriting and Performance as Data Collection, Analysis, and Presentation*, she worked with thirteen members of a Missoula, Montana brain injury support group to see if their work in a collaborative playbuilding process contributed to their self-awareness and a greater understanding of their experiences. She interviewed her participants and used the transcripts of their personal interviews and dramatic group workshops to collaboratively create a script of an original documentary-styled theatre play, thereby privileging the voices of her research participants.

In my case, I used collaborative playbuilding as a means to bring together in a dialogic process both current and former long-term members (defined as individuals who have attended regular church services at least three times per month for twenty years or more) of the Black Church. I engaged the participants, using traditional qualitative methods (e.g. interviews, observations, and a focus group) to investigate their experiences within the Black Church, and I asked each participant to assist in crafting the performance script, rehearsing with actors, and speaking to audience members in a post-show talk-back session. This study, using collaborative playbuilding, provided opportunity and space—outside the confines of the Black Church—for participants to engage in dialogue, to share their stories, and to critically examine (Alexander, Denzin, and Lincoln 2005) their experiences regarding the Black Church, for within the

Last Sunday: Using Collaborative Playbuilding to Understand Why Some African Americans Leave the Black Church
James Webb

institution, such opportunities for dialogue, reflection, and critical questioning do not always exist (Cone 1978; Mattis et al. 2004; Miller 2007; Gillespie 2009). Participants were able to openly reflect, question, and critique their experiences regarding the institution and to share their stories, opinions, judgments and views of the Black Church with a public audience.

Recruitment and Selection of Participants

Because I was asking participants to co-collaborate with me, I needed to narrow the geography of my study to a specific locale that would garner me greater access for prolonged engagement (Padgett 1998). I chose Leon County, Florida—a North Florida region where I lived and worked as an assistant professor of theatre at a local university. To recruit participants, I posted flyers at beauty salons, barber shops, and grocery stores. I mailed flyers to local Black churches. I posted flyers on bulletin boards around the college campus where I worked, and I solicited “word of mouth” advertisement from friends and colleagues on Facebook. On the flyers, I asked potential recruits, “Would you be interested in discussing your experiences surrounding the church and participating in a theatre project based on your stories?” I explained that I was seeking to recruit both current and former long-term Black Church members—individuals who had attended church services for twenty years or more. I stated that this study was designed for laypersons of the church rather than pastors or ministers. I informed potential recruits their participation would involve a questionnaire, a personal interview, and a focus group discussion, and that portions of their stories would be used as part of a theatre project to be presented before a live audience. I also stated that selected participants would be invited to participate in rehearsals as well as a post-show audience discussion.

After I received several emails and phone calls from interested recruits, I emailed each of them a questionnaire, asking specific questions about the recruit’s demographic information, church attendance, and willingness to participate in a collaborative theatre project. Based on their answers, I verified which recruits matched my research criteria; determined which recruits were willing (or not) to actively participate in a collaborative, dialogic process; and identified the recruits’ church denomination affiliations, recognizing that some recruits had been members of more than one denomination throughout their lifetime. Lastly, via the questionnaire, I established which recruits were current members of the Black Church and which ones had severed their membership with the institution.

After analyzing the questionnaires and considering each recruit, I invited six African American men and women to participate in my study, a sufficient number for a homogenous sample (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Marshall and Rossman, 1989; and Patton 1990). With several different denominations represented, I made my selection decision based on those individuals who matched my research criteria and who stated that they were willing to participate in a collaborative theatre project based on their narratives.

Data Collection Procedures

After selecting the six research participants, I used several methods to collect data: initial questionnaire, personal interviews, a focus group, observations, scriptwriting, rehearsals, and a post-show talk-back session. The use of various methods to collect data aids in the

Last Sunday: Using Collaborative Playbuilding to Understand Why Some African Americans Leave the Black Church
James Webb

trustworthiness of the study (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). To capture the behaviors, attitudes, nonverbal responses, gestures, and body language of my participants, which were essential components of the research (because meaning cannot be separated from context), I often used audio- and videotaping and took extensive field notes, which began with the first interview, continued throughout rehearsals, and concluded with the post-show talk-back discussion with audience members. I organized my field notes and the data into a field log.

In addition to field notes, I kept a journal of analytic memos to document and distinguish my various roles (researcher, dramaturge, scriptwriter, and director) throughout the research process. With these memos, I was able to dialogue with myself concerning the process. Recognizing that the process of interpretation and meaning-making is something that occurs moment-to-moment rather than at the end once all the data has been collected, I used my analytic memos to shape and direct my actions throughout the study.

Before I commenced with the one-on-one interviews, I presented each of the six research participants with an approved consent form describing the study's purpose. I informed them of their right to use a pseudonym to protect their identity and the anonymity of any people or places they discuss. However, I also cautioned that, while they may choose to use pseudonyms, there was a limit placed on the confidentiality of their identity because they were being asked to partake in a focus group with other participants, work with actors in a rehearsal process, and participate in a post-show talk-back discussion with audience members. I also explained that their participation in any step of the research process was strictly voluntary and participants had the right to withdraw themselves from the process at any time. They also had the right to remove any section(s) of their interviews from the performance script.

The sixty-minute, one-on-one interviews were all conducted during the same week in my office at the university where I worked. I organized my interview protocol with main questions, follow-up questions, and probes. I used a semi-formal structure and asked open-ended questions. The interviews were audio- and videotaped to capture the participants' verbatim words, which were later used in the actual performance. During the interview process, my two greatest strengths were my genuine curiosity about the participants and their stories *and* my keen awareness of my personal biases regarding the Black Church. As Niobe Way (2005) states, "Biases offer a perspective, and only through having a perspective can we see and possibly understand the vantage points of others" (531). By recognizing my biases, I was able to challenge my personal notions of the Black Church, keeping myself open to possibilities of seeing the institution in a different light. Ultimately, the findings of my research did not fully support my preconceived notions of the Black Church but rather revealed something entirely different. I attribute this to my active search for disconfirming evidence, which Kuzel and Like (1991) describe as "deliberately looking for evidence that challenges" the researcher's understanding of the data.

Data Analysis

In addition to the field notes and analytic memos that were included in my field log, I also used Carol Gilligan's *Listening Guide* method to analyze the participants' narratives. Her systematic method, which draws on "voice, resonance, and relationship as ports of entry into the *Last Sunday: Using Collaborative Playbuilding to Understand Why Some African Americans Leave the Black Church* James Webb

human psyche,” is comprised of a series of sequential listenings. Gilligan explains that these listenings are grounded in the “assumption that the psyche, like voice, is contrapuntal (not monotonic) so that simultaneous voices are co-occurring” (Gilligan, et al. 2003,157; 159). Simply stated, a participant can be saying one thing on the surface, while a completely different subtext of messages, some of which are in tension with one another, can be embedded underneath.

Gilligan’s method has four steps:

1. Listening for the plot. In this step, I read through the text and listened “to what is happening or what stories are being told” (160). Furthermore, I gave focus to my own personal responses to those stories, “explicitly bringing [my] own subjectivities into the process of interpretation from the start by identifying, exploring, and making explicit [my] own thoughts and feelings” about the narrative.

2. I constructed what Elizabeth Debold (1990) has called *I poems*. These poems focused directly on the first-person pronoun within a narrative and its preceding word, which is usually—but not always—a verb. According to Gilligan, “Sometimes the ‘I poem’ captures something not stated directly but central to the meaning of what is being said” (163). The poems helped me deconstruct the narrative from its fuller text version to find meaning that was otherwise hidden. For example, when I asked one research participant if he ever disagreed with his pastor’s sermon, he stated,

Um, I don’t think so. Not a complete sermon. Maybe a point in his sermon, um, I think I would maybe have disagreed with, Um, I guess maybe read a scripture and took something out of it that I, when I read it, I saw something different, um, So yea, I probably disagreed with some of the points of it.

Using the “I poem” formula, I extracted from the text the following “I poem” :

I don’t

I think

I would

I guess

I

I read

I saw

I probably

Last Sunday: Using Collaborative Playbuilding to Understand Why Some African Americans Leave the Black Church
James Webb

From this deconstruction, I could surmise that although he stated that he had moments where he disagreed with his pastor's sermon, his disagreements did not play a major role in his decision to maintain or sever his relationship with the church. Since his poem was rather passive and nonchalant, I knew I needed to continue my investigation. In so doing, I found a different reason as to why he maintains his church membership (which I discuss later).

3. In the third step, I listened for any contrapuntal voices. This stage of the analysis ties directly back to the research question because this step offered a way of "hearing and developing an understanding of several different layers of a person's expressed experience as it bears on the questioned posed" (164). Because a participant's narrative often contained multiple voices, I established a set of criteria or markers to distinguish one voice from the other. Once a particular voice was determined, I then conducted a thorough reading of the full text, specifically listening for the meanings made in that one voice, underlining or highlighting it as such. Then, I continued the process with any other established voices, which may have been in opposition or complementary to one another. For example, in one woman's narratives, I could identify several different voices: the participant speaking as herself, speaking on behalf of God, speaking as her pastors, and speaking as a long-standing church member. By differentiating the various voices, I was able to distinguish her personal views regarding the church from any ruling relation that might have influenced her decision to maintain or sever her church membership.

4. In the final step, I composed an analysis, based on my notes, highlights, underlinings, and summaries of the first three steps. Using Gilligan's analysis to develop "an interpretation or text...that pulls together and synthesizes what has been learned" (168), I was then able to construct new questions for the focus group.

Focus Group

Approximately two weeks after I conducted the personal interviews, I facilitated a four-hour focus group discussion with four of the six participants. I audio- and videotaped the session so that portions of the focus group could be used in the performance script. My purpose for the focus group was three-fold: (1) I wanted to share with the participants my initial analysis of their personal interviews; (2) I wanted their help in making sense of the themes and commonalities that surfaced from their stories; and (3) I wanted to discuss with them my ideas about the performance script and solicit their feedback and suggestions.

I admitted to the group that prior to their personal interviews I had assumed that those who chose to leave the Black Church and never return did so because of some form of oppression. However, after analyzing the interviews, I found that although oppression does exist in the Black Church, I could not confirm that it was the primary reason why some of the participants left. Instead, I saw other themes emerge: hypocrisy, ethical concerns regarding church funds, ideological differences, manner of worship, etc.

In an act of member checking (Guba 1981), I shared my initial analysis and listened to the participants' opinions, stories, and comments, thereby generating more data. Kuzel and Like (1991) declare that member checking is one of the techniques used by researchers to enhance a

study's validity, and it speaks to the process of dialogue between researcher and respondents. Rather than study the participants, I chose to learn from them.

One of the major discussions that surfaced in the focus group dealt with the notion that Black churches are in abundance, and because of this, if one dislikes what happens in one church, then one can easily go to another one. Still, there were some participants in the study who had become skeptical of all Black churches, which led us to consider that there must be a larger abstract concept as to why some African Americans leave the Black Church and choose not to go back. Though we ended the focus group session without clearly determining what that larger abstract concept is, the participants and I agreed that I would formulate a first draft of the performance script based on our discussion and that I would share that draft with them for feedback. Furthermore, I would use the scriptwriting process to continue my analysis and inform them of any new discoveries.

Scriptwriting

My personal knowledge of playwriting stems from fifteen years of experience as a theatre practitioner. I have taken graduate courses in playwriting and penned four full-length plays, which have had several readings and productions. My second play, *The Contract*, was the winner of the Kennedy Center's Lorraine Hansberry Playwriting Award. As a playwright, I champion form. Normally, when I write a play, I follow Gustav Freytag's pyramid and Aristotle's *Poetics* to shape the play's plot and structure. However, to follow Freytag's plot guidelines, I would have to identify one clear protagonist for the overall story. Since this study was collaborative in nature, I could not simply choose to illuminate one participant as the main character and the rest as supporting players. To do so would go against the very nature of the study. Thus, I had to approach the script in a new way.

Initially, when I approached this study, I assumed the lines of demarcation would be clear: I would have some participants who were very adamant about their church membership and some who were staunchly against ever going back to church again. I thought that I would be able to build a script by pitting the two sides against each other—current vs. former churchgoers. However, I began to notice from the interviews and focus group that there were no clear sides to the argument. In fact, after further analysis, I began to see that those participants who had left the Black Church were still open to the idea of rejoining the institution, if there were major reforms. As I continued to explore this dilemma, I began to see from their narratives that the larger abstract concept that compelled one participant to stay and another to leave was trust.

From that point, I turned to Annette Baier's *Trust and Antitrust* treatise to serve as a theoretical framework for my study. I identified four key arguments from her treatise that spoke directly to the participants' narratives. I analyzed and coded the interview transcripts again, and used her four trust arguments to guide me through formulating the script. Using only the participants' verbatim narratives, I pulled together stories and created scenes that unpacked the notion of trust—trust in God, trust in people, and trust in the institution. In so doing, I was able to create an important through-line for the play without having to single out only one protagonist.

The collaborative, dialogic nature of the study was maintained and reflected in the structure of the play.

I was very excited during this part of the process because I was discovering new meaning about my research question while engaged in writing the script. For me, crafting the script was a major part of the data analysis process. Jillian Campana (2005) stated that while she was crafting the script for her study, she had to “gingerly” walk a line between privileging aesthetics vs. favoring the needs of her participants. I was also faced with this challenge and thankful for it because for me, the scriptwriting process was the added bonus or “second wind” of my research design. Had this study been a traditional qualitative study, I might have ended my investigation, settling on the findings that I surmised from the initial personal interviews and focus group. However, it was the script writing process that led me to discover and explore the notion of trust.

In transcribing their interviews and their focus group participation, I used a style developed by Anna Deavere Smith, who is known for her documentary/interview theatre plays: *Fires in the Mirror*; *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*; and *Let Me Down Easy*. Smith developed a method of transcribing that captures meaning and feeling within the text. This includes transcribing all of the “ums” and pauses that accompany informal conversation. For example, if a participant paused or stopped speaking mid-sentence, I would move to the next line and begin typing when they started to speak again. At first glance, the words on the page look like poetry. Once I completed the first script draft, I emailed it to each of the participants and awaited their feedback.

Rehearsals, Performance, & Post-Show Talk-back

As principal research investigator, I also served as director of the play. To me, the most precious gift that a director can give to a creative team is dialogue—the space and capacity for multiple perspectives and ideas to flourish. I have directed over a dozen plays throughout the span of my career, and many of them were new plays, based in ensemble theatre. Generally, for new play development, playwrights present their plays to an audience first as a reading or staged reading. Audiences are then often invited to give feedback or ask questions during post-show talk-backs to help strengthen the play. I decided to use the same process for my research project.

I cast the play, using local actors from the community and theatre students from the university where I taught. I also cast two colleagues of mine who are both assistant professors of philosophy and religion who were also experienced community theatre actors. We rehearsed in a black box theatre space located on the university campus where I worked. I scheduled three four-hour rehearsals with the cast and invited the research participants to attend each one. In the first rehearsal, the actors and I sat at a long table, read through the script, and discussed the play. Then, I took each actor into my office one-by-one and let them see a small portion of the videotaped interview of the participant they were portraying. (I had already received prior permission from each of the participants to allow the actors portraying them to see a portion of their tapes.) I entertained questions from each actor and asked them to describe to me what they saw in the tape as it relates to their portrayals. Afterwards, we gathered together and read through the script again, and as I expected, the actors brought greater nuance and detail to their readings.

Only one participant showed up for the first day of rehearsal, and he only stayed for the first few minutes because of a prior engagement. However, at the second rehearsal, three were in attendance. During that rehearsal, I staged the reading. I placed six chairs in a horizontal straight line for the actors. I also stationed sixty chairs in three rows in a semi-circle facing the actors. These sixty chairs were for the audience. I wanted the room to resemble a focus-group setting so that the audience would feel as much a part of the conversation as the actors.

For most of the second rehearsal, the three interviewees remained quiet. During a rehearsal break, I spoke with them to get their thoughts and feedback. In that conversation, we decided the play needed a prologue that would inform the audience of the play's purpose. Ultimately, the prologue was the only text in the play that was written using my words. The rest of the play was crafted using verbatim words from the participants' interviews and the focus group. The prologue did serve the play well because it made clear to the audience that the people performing the roles were actors, that the stories were real, and that this performance was a part of a research project with a specific objective.

At our final rehearsal, I solidified the staging and added secular and spiritual music for scene changes. I added minimal lighting and brought in an 8'x10' rug and a few large plants from the props shop to enhance the ambience. The cast and I reviewed the blocking and did a run-through of the show. For the final rehearsal, there were no research participants in attendance.

I advertised the staged reading, using flyers around campus, Facebook, and "word of mouth" by my friends and colleagues. We presented the play on a Friday evening with no intermission before a live audience of approximately fifty people. The play lasted ninety minutes. At the end of the performance, we took a ten-minute break and reconvened for a post-show talk-back session. To maintain the participants' confidentiality, I did not introduce them to the rest of the audience. I decided it was their choice if they wanted to speak or introduce themselves. I facilitated the talk-back, restating to the audience the purpose of the study and the primary objectives for the talk-back session, which were two-fold: I wanted to hear from audience members their feedback and thoughts about the content of the play as it relates to the research question; and I wanted to hear the audience's comments regarding the structure of the play, in case I wanted to make changes for future productions.

The discussion was lively and lasted approximately thirty minutes. Each of the four participants present spoke out and introduced themselves during the talk-back. Many of the audience members stated that while they were watching the play, they were reflecting on their own personal experience in the Black Church and trying to grapple with the reasons why they either maintained their membership or left. Many of their stories echoed the stories portrayed in the play.

Conclusion

In 2010, when the *Huffington Post* published a provocative essay by Eddie Glaude, professor of religion at Princeton University, entitled "The Black Church is Dead," Glaude received a flood of criticism from Black Church leaders, who focused more on his right to

Last Sunday: Using Collaborative Playbuilding to Understand Why Some African Americans Leave the Black Church
James Webb

criticize the Black Church rather than his thesis. In the *New York Times*, Rev. Dr. J. Alfred Smith, Sr., pastor emeritus of Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland, California, responded, “I am sick and tired of Black academics, who are paid by rich, powerful ivy league schools, who have access to the microphone and the ear of the press, pontificating about the health of Black churches. None of these second- or third-generation Black academics talk to us in the trenches. They are too elitist to talk to us” (A12).

In this study, I did go in the “trenches” and spoke directly to people. I believe this research design was an effective choice—fostering dialogue, championing the voices of African American current and former churchgoers, adding new data to the literature, and expanding the conversation about why some African Americans leave the Black Church and choose not to go back.

As the Black Church continues to (re)define its relevance in the 21st century, it will be important to continue to examine the voices of its members. Though I stand in critique of the institution, I still believe the Black Church has an inherent desire to help and further the progress of its people. Perhaps, by using this study to illuminate the voices of those who have invested over two decades of their lives into the Black Church, church leaders can gain better understanding of their members and find solutions to making the institution a more liberating and spiritually relevant fixture in the African American community. Likewise, church laypersons can reclaim their voices and speak out boldly when appropriate to critically question and critically examine their experiences in the institution, thereby eliminating any sense of *voicelessness* in the Black Church.

As a next step, I would like to see the study’s play, which we titled *Last Sunday*, be presented in Black churches as a catalyst for dialogue, particularly in regards to trust. I believe such an endeavor would spark newer research questions, such as how might viewing a play that was created collaboratively by current and former African American churchgoers affect trust between Black Church leaders and congregants? What effect does viewing a play that was created collaboratively by current and former African American churchgoers have on former members of the Black Church? What might former members of the Black Church and current Black Church leaders reveal about their experiences in the institution, particularly in regards to trust, when engaged in collaborative playbuilding?

As a result of the insights garnered from this study, I intend to use collaborative playbuilding throughout my career as a scholar and theatre practitioner, as a means of bringing together stakeholders in a dialogic process. (At the institution where I currently teach, I have already drafted a proposal to use collaborative playbuilding to investigate the phenomenon of college hazing.) I also hope more educational theatre scholars will use collaborative playbuilding as a research methodology, for there are many questions still to be explored regarding dramaturgical and artistic challenges that may arise for the researcher/playwright. As for myself, after engaging in this research study, I have become a champion of collaborative playbuilding as an artform and as a research methodology.

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APPENDIX

An Excerpt from *LAST SUNDAY: AN ETHNODRAMA*

PROLOGUE

ACTOR PLAYING “DEXTER HARRIS”

Hello. I’m [insert actor’s name]. And I’m one of the actors in this play. The performance you are about to witness is a research project, stories collected from six individuals who have three things in common.

ACTOR PLAYING “EUNICE SAUNDERS”

1. They are all self-identified as African American.
2. They have each been active members of Black churches for at least twenty years or more.
3. At the time these stories were collected, they were all living in the North Florida.

ACTOR PLAYING “FREDERICK PERRYMORE, III”

The purpose of this research is to learn about the experiences of African Americans in the Black Church.

ACTOR PLAYING “MELVIN MIDDLETON, JR.”

And to try and understand why some withdraw their membership from Black churches And choose not to go back.

ACTOR PLAYING “SISTER MARY”

You will hear from both current and former members of the Black church. Some of the names have been changed, but the stories are real. These are their words. Let us begin . . .

SCENE ONE

LINDA STRINGER

I’m Linda Stringer. Born in Fort Pierce, Florida. 1947. I been a member at Metropolitan, the church I attend now, probably since ’88 or ’89. See when I grew up, everybody went to church, especially the Black people. I mean, that was our, um, recreation per se. That was when we had time to see everybody, all the neighbors and everything. Didn’t necessarily have anything to do with whether we were saved or not. We just went to church.

DEXTER HARRIS

Dexter Harris. I'm 36 years old. Born in Melbourne, Florida. Currently, I go to an AME church in the city. I love my church. I've been going to church as long as I can remember. I guess, I was going to church as a child, baptized in the church. Um, my earliest recollection had to be five or six. Honestly, what I remember is that I couldn't stay awake in church. And um, my sister and I, she would get on, on one side of my mom, and I would get on the other, and we spread out, and then fall asleep in her lap.

EUNICE SAUNDERS

Eunice Johnson Saunders. Tallahassee, Florida. I'm not ever going to join a church again. I was born during the Depression. We lived in very, small houses. Outdoor toilets. No running water. So, um, it was, it was by today's standards abject poverty.

But I had working parents. And um, my grandparents owned property, land, and that sort of thing. And they went to church to vent that, that spiritual part of themselves. I think church was held once a month. And it was also a social occasion because they'd go out and eat in the yard, and everybody would bring their food. 'Cuz it was a whole day's, you know. Rather like a carnival I think, because everybody was dressed up and that sort of thing. And it was very rural. And I'd sit there and listen to them sing those long drawn out hymns and think, "When are they going to finish?" But you had to sit there. I was basically an observer. I have always been more an observer than a participant.

MELVIN MIDDLETON, JR.

I'm Melvin Middleton, Jr. Born in Detroit, Michigan. 1975. I am currently not a member of any church. There are certain churches, or should I say, there're profiles of churches that I won't go to. Period. Um, I remember, probably being, and this was when we moved to South Carolina, I would guess I was maybe three or four, going to church, in what I considered this big building. And by the nature of the Catholic Church, there's sitting and standing and kneeling and all that good stuff. And I can remember just kinda kneeling around and playing in the pews. And my mother, my sister, which my dad wasn't there, but my mother, my sisters, my grandmother, my paternal grandmother, we would all go to church. And that's really what I remember in this big building, and this priest—who was a Black man. It was the church that my father grew up in. It was all Black—and, you know, um first communion, confirmation, and all that good stuff.

And it was just kinda me playing around in the pews, Or, you know, the kneeler in the pews. And that's. . . I was probably three or four years old.

SISTER MARY

You can call me Sister Mary. Born in Hallandale, Florida. South Florida. I've been a member of the United Methodist Church for the last five years. But I basically started going to church when I was about eleven or twelve. I think so late because my parents were not churchgoers and it

wasn't high on their priority list. And like I said, my father, I don't think he went to church when he was coming up. And my mother, I don't recall that part of her life or her going, so it wasn't really that big of a deal. Basically, my father would just drop me off, and my brothers, and then he would come back and pick us up. I don't really think that my father thought it was important to really go to church at that time. And I could remember my brother just thought it was just. . . he would actually mock the people in church because, you know, sometimes people would shout and they would get on their knees and they would be just He would like get home and just like imitate the people and laugh. And he just thought it was just hilarious. But I was excited about it because I thought it was something new and different and um, I met people and, I mean, the whole idea of being baptized was . . . just something awesome to me at that time.

EUNICE SAUNDERS

I do need to mention to you though in regards to church, um, my mother belonged to the AME church in the city. My mother was in school. She was working to be a teacher. in the city of Tallahassee, you know, the area in which I was born. There was a very big difference in that church and that of, the rural church.

And so I had the experience of the dichotomy. And I liked what went on in the city church, because it did not require me to invest a lot of my energies. I could, I could sit back and, and absorb the music that they sang, which was often Eurocentric because, you know, the Methodist church evolved from the Caucasian church. And we sang those kinds of songs in the church that I was brought up in. And um, they had some educated people in there and they were many times Eurocentric when it comes to music. So, um, you know, it was an interesting experience.

DEXTER HARRIS

I would say what I like most about church is um, the fellowship. A fellowship of, of people who share a common belief. Um, I guess being away from home, it's, it's another family. Um. A lot of older ladies who, who love to take care of someone who is like their grandson or something like that, um, and who don't mind, you know, checking you when you're, when you're out of line or, or seemingly going astray. It's um, it's a family.

FREDERICK PERRYMORE, III

Frederick Perrymore, III. I was born in Melbourne, Florida. 1982. For some kind of way, we ended up in West Palm Beach, and that's where I went to elementary school. After that, Hurricane Andrew. Moved up here to Tallahassee, went to middle school and high school. Actually to be honest, I'm actually surprised you're able to . . . actually get anyone to admit that they left the church and haven't gone back. Um, That really is a tall order, because not only, I mean, because honestly, it was some hesitation. Like "Dang, I'm actually admitting that I left the church and I haven't been back in a while," you know. Um, there's a certain shame in coming in. No, not even coming in, but just admitting, Mm, I haven't gone back. Um, I would say I had a good childhood, Nothing . . . Well my stepfather wasn't the best, but We were in church. We was always in some kind of church regardless of whatever move my mom made. She made sure I was. And we had several church homes I would say in the early '90s and the '80s.

Last Sunday: Using Collaborative Playbuilding to Understand Why Some African Americans Leave the Black Church
James Webb

But once we moved up here, there was just this one church we stayed with for like the longest time. I won't mention the name, but um, well I could—St. John's—but it's a thousand different St. Johns everywhere, so . . . We was at St. John's and that's where I've been the longest. I would say about twelve or thirteen years. Lot of family and friends who still go there. But there was an issue that instigated my leaving. So they went there and they left. They came back after that issue had been resolved. But um, I never went back.

Transition . . .

SCENE FOUR

DEXTER HARRIS

Um, I don't think you can go to church and be half way involved and not experience I guess what we call in the church as "church hurt." Um, A negative experience. Um, I mean, there's so many when, when you're dealing with people. And um, you're not always going to agree. Um, I've been in church all my life, And church folks are interesting. Um, some of them are, let me just say, very interesting.

FREDERICK PERRYMORE, III

Well, we had a pastor in the church. I was one of the main cheerleaders. I really believed in what he was saying and doing. But then there were these allegations with um, misappropriations of funds. And . . . I had noticed that there were some deacons and mothers in the church who were very vocal about what was going on. I remember every other Sunday, we would get these very fire-breathing sermons about rebellion is of the devil. And so I was with the pastor not knowing what was really going on but the allegations kept coming. Well . . . he sold his van to the church at an exorbitant price. And the van was already at least ten years old. But it was sold to the church at—as though it was brand new. And I noticed that within a short period of time, the pastor, his wife, and his oldest daughter managed to get brand new cars. And he was a state worker, so I knew for a fact—now I really know, since I'm a state worker—I knew for a fact he couldn't really have been making that much money to support the lifestyle that he had. And so the allegations escalated. Some people started slowly leaving the church. Like old, old timers, people whose families had been in that church for a while, they started to fall off. And then it got to a point where there was an investigation by the IRS due to the tax issue. Because what happened is he changed the name of the church for tax or financial reasons. But it allowed him access to other trust funds from the church. And the IRS got involved and there were indictments handed out and eventually he was arrested or charged. When I had finally realized that this man had dooped us all, because, you know, we were a small church, but we were the kind of people, those of us who were tried and true, would give our last. You know, we were the kind of people that when the pastor said, "O well, you know, we need extra money for this . . ." Well, you know, we might not have really had it, but we gave it.

MELVIN MIDDLETON, JR.

Last Sunday: Using Collaborative Playbuilding to Understand Why Some African Americans Leave the Black Church
James Webb

Um, I guess one of the things that, um, really was a problem for me was this concept of confession, and going to this . . . what was essentially to me a set of closets. And you have to catalog every sin that you committed, and then you ask the priest to, um, facilitate your forgiveness, is basically what I— It almost became a joke— And in school, when we would be sent to confession, we'd just start making up stuff to tell the priest, because, I mean, who's gonna be able to tell, you know, what they did wrong every day of their life. And so, it just . . . it just lost its reality. And I'll be honest with you. One of the things that, um, was going on, was all this, um, exposure of priests and molestation, and things like that. And so, I was like racking my brain, thinking like, "Did I like block something out that happened?" Because actually I spent much time, you know, by myself with a priest because I was an altar boy. And so I was at their service, you know, for lack of a better word. And so, um, it was always in the back of my head, asking myself if I had kinda blocked out some type of abuse. And I kinda resigned to the fact that nothing happened. But I think that . . . that really kinda did it for me in terms of the Catholic church. It just seemed so rampant. And it seemed that the cover up was so pervasive as well. And so that, um . . . That was really the end for me.

FREDERICK PERRYMORE, III

When I got older and wised up, I remember we would have these revivals. And the visiting preacher would stand up and say— He would stop the music, which you know you don't do that in a Black church, you know. That's serious business when you stop the music. You really had to be moved by the Holy Ghost especially if we really had that song going— And he would say, "There are five people in the crowd right now who got \$500 in their pocket, And the Lord is telling them to sow a seed." And so lo and behold, five people would stand up, but then two or three more, but he would say, "That's okay. That's okay. Let the Lord move you." And they would come right up and they would give they \$500. And two of those people I knew for a fact, that \$500, they just so happened to have that money in their pocket at the time, but that was they rent money. Or that was they mortgage money. And I said, "You know what? This person, he knew this was a payday Friday." Everybody know the end of the month, or the last of the month, nine times out of ten, somebody's getting paid on that Friday. So he knew this. But it was an opportunity he had there, and he worked that window. And he got that money.

MELVIN MIDDLETON, JR.

I feel like if I go to a church and, you know, if I just so happened to hit a sermon where it's about tithing or money or whatever, I don't expect that when I come the next time it's going to be about that again.

FREDERICK PERRYMORE, III

I remember, I remember one time I went to a church and I was just visiting, and there was these cloths there. And you know, I was sweating. We had walked a little while and I wanted one. "That's a prayer cloth. If you want one, you got to pay." I said, "What?" "You got to pay." And um, it wasn't a, you know, kind way she said it. It was like, "No, you got to pay."

MELVIN MIDDLETON, JR.

Last Sunday: Using Collaborative Playbuilding to Understand Why Some African Americans Leave the Black Church
James Webb

I remember one sermon where the pastor was like “Well, um, some people have asked me if you’re supposed to, um, tithe before or after your taxes.” And he’s like, “Well, my God is not a net person. My God is . . . He’s a gross God.”

FREDERICK PERRYMORE, III

[laughs] We had this one preacher, he was looking around, “I know its three people in the crowd. I know its three people in the crowd who got X amount of dollars and they just scared to give it to the Lord.” And for some kind of reason I was looking down, you know, cuz at the time I did have some money. But you know, I ain’t want to be one of them ones, and I really needed that so, so I’m looking around, clapping, I’m saying “Amen,” making sure I don’t give eye contact with the brother. And God dangit, lo and behold, he walked over there—and I purposely sat in the back because I did not want to get gypped out of my money this Sunday. And I say gypped because I kinda felt like that’s what was going on over a period of time, you know. They keep asking for our money— But he called me out, he say, “Son, something telling me you want to give this money here today but you holding back. The devil is busy. He’s staying your hand.” So, I was like “Dangit, I’m caught. What am I’m gon’ do?” Well, there was an out. I looked down and thank God, there was the, um, the offering envelopes. The offering envelopes they have for every church service, you know, for tithes or whatnot, and you write how much it is, and then you put your money in the envelope. Well, I had two singles, you know, two single dollar bills in my pocket. I crumpled them bad boys up so they couldn’t really see the full dollar amount, I opened the envelope, put the money in there, act like I prayed over it, walked around and put that envelope right on the table. Because I didn’t feel like I was doing anything wrong. I felt like I was rebelling against the shadiness of this man coming here, raising money off us.

And so um, I just became disillusioned from the church because I saw the hypocrisy of preaching thrift but spending lavishly on the backs of the money that people was giving to the church. And that was one of the main reasons why I left. Just the commercialization of the church. I think that’s what has created this great divide between God and the church.

Transition . . .

LINDA STRINGER

Um . . . I remember hearing about those kinds of things happening. But one thing, um, one thing that I often tell people . . . I used to do new member orientation, when new members came to the church, and I used to have to talk with them. And I would always tell them: “There’s no perfect church. So you got to know that God sent you here.” That’s one thing about me, I know where God placed me for this season. I tell them you gotta know that this is where you’re supposed to be because there’s gonna come a time when you’re gonna want to leave. You’re gonna get mad. and you’re not gonna agree with everything Pastor say. But I know I’ve been called here. And until this season is over, I’ll be here.

SISTER MARY

There's some saved people in all churches. And there's some people who are going straight to hell. It doesn't matter if it's Catholic, Protestant, United Methodist, AME, CME, Church of God in Christ, Apostolic Faith, blah, blah, blah. Christianity is a personal thing. It's knowing God. And knowing who He is, and Him knowing you, and your intimate relationship with him. It's not about tithing, And not about getting up, "Hallelujah, Praise the Lord." It's not about that. It's gonna be, "Do you know Him? And, does He know you?" That's gonna be the final question.

LINDA STRINGER

The church that I was in at the time when I was going through my divorce Was a very close-knit church. My ex-husband was a member of the church for a while. Um, even during his philandering days. But um, they—the church—were very supportive. They were very supportive. And not just my church, but the body of Christ in general because I didn't just, I mean I went to other churches: Church of God by Faith, Church of God in Christ, to programs and such. I knew a lot of people knew what was going on, and they were pretty supportive. And that helped a lot to just have people around me that didn't, um, that was just there. They just supplied . . . My old pastor was very good. My pastor in Riviera Beach was. He's just a giving man. So, he just used to do stuff. Come by the house, look in the refrigerator and get mad because there was no food in there and I hadn't asked for help. And it was just, I had people praying for me and I knew that. I knew that.

SISTER MARY

I had a respect for my pastor. A very intelligent man. He knew the Word. And um, It worked for me then. It worked. But it got to the point that it just, for some reason I just felt like there was something missing. I felt like, spiritually dead. I felt very dry. I was living in South Florida in 2007. I was going to church, but I felt like I was . . . like something was missing. That I wasn't quite all what God wanted me to be. Because in that particular church, they are very . . . There's restrictions as far as women. They don't believe in women pastors. They don't believe in women being over men in any capacity. They don't believe in instrumental music. And they don'tWell, let's just say this: they believe that they're the only people going to heaven. Really. But at that time, that worked for me, because that was all I knew. But there was something burning inside of me said, "Wait a minute, There's more than this." I mean, I was not even allowed to pray over a man. If we was having, um, Sunday school with all women, and it was time to dismiss, and there were men sitting nearby, we had to get a deacon to come dismiss us. That's how oppressed this whole church thing was in my mind. And I remember going to a church like that in Tallahassee, And I didn't know you couldn't speak. It was a mixture of men and women and they were talking about the bible, And I raised my hand up to answer, and they kinda like, they gave me the eyebrow lift like, "What?" And I didn't find out until after that I couldn't speak. I had to go to the ladies class if I wanted to say something. I said, "O my God, this is not for me." I couldn't even speak? And when I told my daughter Deborah, she said, "Ma, you wasn't supposed to say nothing in that class." I said, "Really?" I said, "But there was a mixture of men and women." She say, "Well, you can only ask a question or speak out in the ladies class." I said, "Forget this." And so I kinda stepped out on faith, and just broke the tradition . . . of women being a pastor, or praying over a man. A woman can be a pastor. A woman can be a bishop. A woman can be a leader. She can be a teacher. She can be whatever God deems her to

Last Sunday: Using Collaborative Playbuilding to Understand Why Some African Americans Leave the Black Church
James Webb

be. And um, after that experience, that's basically when I got introduced to the United Methodist Church. I liked the fact that it . . . it didn't oppress women. I mean, you could get up and speak, you could teach. You could . . . they had women . . . they got women bishops, And they have scholarships. They send you to college. They send you to divinity school. They have things that really empower women. Now I won't say that I won't become a member of a church where there's a male pastor, But I wouldn't want to be a member of a church where women are just squashed. I just feel like I have more to offer than just sitting on the pew, and saying "Amen," and nod my head to a man.

LINDA STRINGER

In my old church, my pastor did not believe in women wearing pants. So, um, when I first got saved, I didn't wear any, and criticized everybody that did. And, um, you know, of course, the Church of God in Christ was like that, too. So, when you went to visit them, you definitely didn't have on pants. But I used to be a stickler for it. But I've grown, you know. And um, I can remember one time after I didn't believe that anymore about not wearing pants, my pastor, he came over to the house one time And he saw me in pants—he used to call me Missionary. Oh, he preached about that I think for the next two months. He didn't call my name but I knew he was talking about me. "Now my missionary's wearing pants." [She laughs] But um, I told God, when I move from there, that I was not gon' be bound by a lot of the stuff that I was bound by in Riviera Beach. When I lived in Riviera Beach, I knew that it was time to move. There's something that . . . I know when it's time to move with me because there's a restlessness that comes, and there's nothing that can satisfy that. Even in praying, you know. I been at, Metro, um, my church now, for probably since '88, '89. Um, I'm there. I know that's where God has me. But I would have no problems if He said, "Okay, now it's time for you to go somewhere else." But for right now, I'll be here. As long as God says I'm here.

EUNICE SAUNDERS

You know, One size doesn't always fit all, Even in the church, I can see that. One thing most important to me in the church was the music. Music has always fueled my spirituality and it depended on what they sang that Sunday. If they sang a beautiful anthem, it filled me. Now, if they sang something just repetitious, that would excite the older people. That did not interest me. But I liked words. Anytime I had a chance to sing a song with words and meaning, I liked. And, I like the grandeur of an organ. A real organ. I mean, I don't care all that much about the electric piano. But the grandeur of an organ . . . And, I like songs that are going to have in them. . . I like words to be crafted in such a way that I can not only feel, you know, the spirit of the, um, instrumentation, but the words offer something to me that makes me, expands whatever's inside. But those repetitive songs, "Jesus, you're the source" and so forth, where you go on and on and on. And then, after you have done it on and on, out comes the preacher and says the very same thing—Go on with the service. The choir has spent time, you know, going over and over and over that. "Jesus, you're the source." And they've said it about fifty times and then he gets up and says the very same thing, "Jesus, You are the source of my strength." That there, O God, get on with it, please.

Also, I'm not comfortable with unending prayer. I don't like starting a meeting with a prayer, and then this person has got to pray, and that person's got to pray. Now, I know prayer is a very important thing. But one prayer will suffice. First, there's a prayer, and then the deacon, they pray, And then the next person who gets up, he or she must pray. And then before the minister preaches, he must pray. And before the collection, more prayer. I mean, if I were God, I'd take my fishing pole and go out fishing because your bible says He knows what you want before you ask for it. And yet you'reSome of them get up and give current events. And I just feel that sometimes the prayers are redundant. I usually pray before I come. You know, I wake up with prayer in my head. So, um . . . you know, a lot of the redundancies that are there. And then the preacher will say, "Turn to somebody and tell them thus and so." Now what are they there for? To listen. You just told them, and now I must turn to them, and tell them as well. I can't, I can't do that. And people touch me and I don't, I just tell them, "I don't do that." And I do not hold hands to pray. Prayer is an internal thing for me. For He says, "When you pray, go into your closet, For your Heavenly Father knows what you need before you ask for it, And do not stand in the public so that you can be seen." And we see so much of that. The prayer goes on and on and on. And um, you know, I think they're preaching. I call it preaching a prayer. I can't bear it.

Transition . . .

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James Webb has served on the faculty of several institutions, including New York University, University of Florida, Borough of Manhattan Community College, City College, and Bronx Community College. Most recently, he served as assistant professor of Theatre at Florida A&M University, teaching courses in performance and playwriting. He is an accomplished actor and singer, an award-winning playwright, and an emerging scholar. In 2012, his article, "Learning from Dramatized Outcomes," co-authored with NYU Law Professor Peggy Cooper Davis, was published in the *William Mitchell Law Review*.