



*Self-Care for Black Women Clergy:
A Pathway for Awakening The Soul to Becoming Well*

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DEDICATION

This research project is dedicated to the strongest woman I know; the woman who has given and continues to give me unfailing love; the woman who introduced me to faith; the woman who supports and encourages me in every way—my mother, first and always, and forever my friend,
Reba Cannon Davis.

And

This is dedicated to my auntie, Mrs. Aree Hickson, the woman who shared her faith, her stories, and prayers with and for me.

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ABSTRACT

Self-Care for Black Women Clergy: A Pathway for Awakening The Soul to Becoming Well

The shout for women's rights, equality, and the desire to be visible and cared for has been a clarion call for centuries and Black women continue to live in the tension of this shout-both in how we exemplify our faith and in how we have been shaped to show up in the world. This paper will spotlight the systematic devaluation of Black women clergy and patriarchy in the AME church tradition. Research indicates theological spaces and practices are often guided by gender domination against Black women. In contrast, I argue that engagement with the principles of womanist theology and the cultural resonance of music will reconstruct the patriarchal gaze of domination, which opposes the fullness of the work of Christian ministry. I reimagine the church as a space where Black women clergy awaken their souls to expand thought on mental wellness and self-care to thrive as servant-leaders in the church. In this way, my discussion creates a transformative vision for inclusion as a faithful response to human flourishing.

Introduction

Sojourner Truth (1797-1883): Ain't I A Woman?¹

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and

¹ Sojourner Truth (1797-1883): Ain't I A Woman Delivered 1851- Women's Rights Convention, Old Stone Church (since demolished), Akron, Ohio

seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but
Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone,
these women together ought to be able to turn it back and get it right side up again! And
now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

The shout for women's rights, equality, and the desire to be visible and cared for has been
a clarion call for centuries and Black women continue to live in the tension of this shout-both in
how we exemplify our faith and in how we have been shaped to show up in the world.²

Continuing the legacy of Sojourner Truth, embodied in what has become recognized as one of
the most famous abolitionist and women's rights speeches in American history, Black women
continue to share their stories and lived experiences of how they continue to survive in the
struggle to overcome- against all odds.

Black women and suffering have an intimate relationship. In fact, the idea of suffering, at
times, is synonymous with Black women and embodies the context and exigence of our lived
experiences. Katie Cannon asserts, in her book, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the
Black Community*, "Black women are the oppressed of the oppressed, representing the most
vulnerable and the most exploited members of the American society caught in the crossways of
an ongoing struggle for human dignity, struggle against white hypocrisy, struggle for justice, and
struggle to survive."³ This sociological fact has also been interpreted theologically, often to the
detriment of Black women.

I remember growing up to the ideology that suffering was equal to the maturity of one's
faith-the more faithful, the more suffering you were expected to endure. Further, this

² Yolanda Nicole Pierce, *In My Grandmother's House: Black Women, Faith, and the Stories We Inherit* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021).

³ Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*, Revised and Expanded 25th Anniversary Edition. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2021). 5.

glorification of suffering was ascribed to one Scripture that was the overarching cover, which caused one to have an expectation of suffering, as if suffering were a personal gift from God - “to whom much is given, much is required” (Luke 12:48). While a scholarly exegetical analysis of the scripture points to stewardship and responsibility as it relates to faithfulness, somehow in many ecclesial and familial settings, faithfulness is singled out as synonymous with suffering. This misinterpretation leads to a faith in God that asks the question, as posited by Dr. Yolanda Pierce, in her book, *In My Grandmother’s House*, “Does God love Black Women?”⁴

From the period of chattel slavery to the present, Black women have been laden with an arduous journey of navigating a space for mental wellness to thrive in the Black experience. “Black women find that their situation is still one of struggle, a struggle to survive collectively and individually against the continuing harsh historical realities and pervasive adversities in today’s world.”⁵ While there have been advances and progressive initiatives demonstrated in the civil rights and voting rights movements to move societal norms to eradicate the damaging impact of inherent inequities grounded in the historical and ideological hegemony of racism, sexism, and class privilege, there still remain an imperative consciousness for Black women to achieve inclusion, diversity, and equity in the real-lived context of the Black experience. As noted by Cannon, “The Black woman and her family continue to be enslaved to hunger, disease, and the highest rate of unemployment since the Great Depression of the 1930s.”⁶

It is here in this consciousness that I engage the work to explore and evolve to a meaningful path of awakening the soul of woman to becoming well. It is my passion and desire to help, inspire, and encourage women clergy to lead positive, motivating, and fulfilling lives

⁴ Pierce, *In My Grandmother’s House*. 93.

⁵ Cannon, *Katie’s Canon*. 28.

⁶ Cannon. 28.

that will lead to “finding a faith in a God whose love is not predicated upon superhuman endurance of systematic injustice, but offers provision of a tender love and gentle mercy that is given as freely and abundantly as that of a mother.”⁷ I will accomplish this through the critical lens of womanist theology, as an invitation for exploration and analysis through the perspective of a Black woman clergy’s heart, soul, and mind. Integrating culturally informed evidence-based practices, specifically, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Mindfulness, to wellness and self-care provides a trajectory to not only survive, but to thrive in the continued struggle to overcome-against all odds.

Definition and Explanation of Project

Womanism is a term coined by African American author Alice Walker and adapted by Black women theologians: those who did not see their lives reflected in the theology being written by either white or Black men nor in the feminist theology written by white women. Walker describes womanism as a black feminist or feminist of color, committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.⁸ Womanism is a movement that provides a critical response to understanding the discrimination in the Black experience and offers an argument for “Womanist Ethics: What is it and why do people (read Black Women) do what they do?”⁹ In supporting womanism as a movement, “Womanist theologians have created a space to tell Black women’s stories and craft a liberating theology that informs the intersectionality of race, class, gender, sexual identity, and social location that shape our theological viewpoints.”¹⁰

⁷ Pierce, *In My Grandmother’s House*. 99.

⁸ Floyd-Thomas, Stacy. “Womanist Ethics: Identity Formation as a Spiritual Discipline.” VDS Doctor of Ministry Program. March 4, 2023. Video. [S. Floyd-Thomas – Womanist Ethics – Lecture.mov | Powered by Box](#)

⁹ Floyd-Thomas, Stacy. “Womanist Ethics: Identity Formation as a Spiritual Discipline.” VDS Doctor of Ministry Program. March 4, 2023. Video. [S. Floyd-Thomas – Womanist Ethics – Lecture.mov | Powered by Box](#)

¹⁰ Pierce, *In My Grandmother’s House*. XVII.

Many Black women clergy are busy, yet they are not healed from stressors, disappointments, and in some instances trauma, which cause them to move through life surviving rather than thriving and living well. “Maintaining life in survival mode will eventually cause us to lose sight of ourselves and can lead to self-neglect. Self-neglect is a path to self-destruction, which impacts both our physical and mental health.”¹¹ By offering support using a culturally informed approach to evidence based practices of ACT and Mindfulness, I will create opportunities for fellow women clergy to experience psychological flexibility. This will enhance their spirituality and increase the proclivity to lead thriving lives of human flourishing.

Clergy and pastoral counselors face numerous obstacles to personal well-being. On the most observable level, clergy typically work long hours serving the needs of their congregations, often without adequate funding, resources, or facilities. Being constantly “on call” can take its toll on mind, body, and spirit.¹² Additionally, clergy represent spiritual figures within their religious communities and are sought out to receive and bear witness to the emotional burdens of their congregations.¹³ They are presented with accounts of tremendous suffering, unspeakable cruelty, and agonizing doubts from the lives of their congregation members. These emotional burdens rest exclusively on the clergy’s shoulders and account as contributing factors towards clergy burnout, compassion fatigue, and growing concerns about how stress is affecting clergy

¹¹ Thema Bryant Ph.D, ed., *Homecoming: Overcome Fear and Trauma to Reclaim Your Whole, Authentic Self* (Penguin, 2022), 93.

¹² Kershner and Farnsworth.” ACT for Clergy and Pastoral Counselors: Addressing Spiritual Self-Care”, in Jason A. Nieuwsma et al., eds., *ACT for Clergy and Pastoral Counselors: Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to Bridge Psychological and Spiritual Care* (Oakland: Context Press, 2016).

¹³ Nieuwsma et al., 264.

health.¹⁴ The overall position of clergy as the healthiest professionals in the US has started to wane, with chronic diseases such as obesity and hypertension taking a significant toll.¹⁵

Considering this information which pertains to clergy in general, there are inherent challenges that are specific to Black women clergy, particularly in my faith tradition the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). In the Black Christian religious tradition, we are often provided with the cultural and religious messages that prescribe putting others first and in some instances the church over family/self. In the AME Church, it is a common belief or occurrence of congregations to expect that ministers should never deny their requests and should place congregations above themselves and family. The faith leaders perpetuate this notion in their interactions with women ministers, especially single women ministers, and the demands for the church. The types of congregations offered to women and frequently the far distances involved to travel to the congregations, maintain barriers to wellness.

As I move forward in the next stages of this project, I look to name and unpack through the discussion the intrinsic and structural challenges that face this group of women. My personal experience with stroke due to my inclinations of self-neglect, disconnection from self, and attempts to prioritize others while living up to the demands and expectations of faith leaders and congregations rather than choosing to create a space to honor myself, coupled with stories of stress and struggle from clergy girlfriends have inspired me to focus on my inner guidance to help other women clergy find a path that will lead to becoming well. There are many considerations I offer women as they start this journey, all of which have one thing in common,

¹⁴ Nieuwsma et al., 264.

¹⁵ Nieuwsma et al., 264.

the answers for our wellness are within. No one can do the work for you, but you. The secret to the essence of becoming well starts from within.

Relatedly, I offer that evidence-based approaches like ACT and Mindfulness will help inform this idea and specifically address the need for the attention to the psychological and physical self-care of Black women clergy. I argue the importance of knowing your history has a profound impact towards becoming well. I will make specific connections to the Black cultural heritage of music and dance to highlight our innate gifts and cultivated talents from our ancestors, as a means to self-preservation and strong mental health. The key question in this project, I propose: *How does the social construction and formation of the identity of Black woman clergy influence the vital role of efforts to engage self-care and wellness?* Digging deeper within is vital on the journey to becoming well and to create a framework of current systemic challenges in the church and Black culture. The process will support Black women to identify a healthier sense of what women clergy in the Black church tradition need to mitigate barriers for wellness. I propose the following questions for consideration¹⁶:

- What are your values as a woman, clergy, and care provider?
- In what ways have you erased yourself as a woman?
- In what ways have you minimized your voice and remained silent?
- How have you abandoned yourself/values in certain spaces and why?
- What messages of unworthiness do you hold?
- How has seeking validation, approval, or attention compromised you being your authentic self?
- How can you honor yourself and your chosen vocation by offering your authentic self to the work of ministry?
- What practices will you commit to engage in to sustain and thrive in wellness?
- What is the cost to you to maintain wellness?
- What does thriving in wellness look like for you?

¹⁶ Influenced from Thema Bryant Ph.D., ed., *Homecoming: Overcome Fear and Trauma to Reclaim Your Whole, Authentic Self* (Penguin, 2022). 94.

“The ACT model of individual well-being is based on the concept of psychological flexibility, which can be defined as the ability to adapt behavior to varying contexts and situations in the pursuit of one’s core values.”¹⁷ The term “psychological flexibility” itself alludes to the illustrative metaphor of bending without breaking.¹⁸ It is in this contextual thought, that I address some of the challenges that inherently plague Black women surrounding the “superwoman mentality” of being all things to all people at all times, Thereby foregoing being in touch with self and mindfully grounded in the present moment. Additional ACT interventions will include engagement with core processes of the ACT hexaflex: acceptance, contact with the present moment, defusion, self-as context, values, and committed action. Each of these processes will be utilized in enhancing flexibility in the daily life of Black women clergy. My aim is to offer intervention as a tool towards the pursuit of self- care and wellness. I lean in towards incorporating the role of intersectionality, womanist theology perspective, and the cultural resonance of music to inform the work to provide strategic suggestions for practice with colleagues.

When reaching to work within to inform this work, I acknowledge and recognize it produces vulnerability to a new level, which may present as a challenge for some. However, to underscore the suggestion that the secret to the essence of becoming well starts from within, I explore the idea of cultural trauma, as it relates to the structural formation of Black women around the idea of shaping our beliefs and lived experiences. I posit this contextual formation as a contribution to the aforementioned “superwoman mentality” that severely impacts wellness. Gleanings from the module engagement, *Spiritual Care Practice for Intimate and Cultural*

¹⁷ Nieuwsma et al., *ACT for Clergy and Pastoral Counselors*, 265

¹⁸ Nieuwsma et al., 265

Trauma Experiences, in the lecture from Dr. Phillis Sheppard, reinforce this conclusion.

Sheppard states, “Cultural trauma is a disruption in group connection and identification to that group’s values and cultural practices.”¹⁹ The societal events and systemic cultural practices have produced negative impact to the individual and to the cultural group to whom they belong.”²⁰

Further examination and research of this phenomenon will clarify how it plays an important role in this work of gaining insight on the social construction and formation of Black women; and how intersectionality is woven into the connection of self- care.

Social Formation and Constructivism of the Identity of Black Women

“By tracking down the central and formative facts in the Black woman’s social world, one can identify the determinant and determining structures of oppression that have shaped the context in which Black women discriminately and critically interpret Scripture to apprehend the divine Word from the perspective of their own situation.”²¹ As daughters of God, Black women clergy must believe that God sees them. The “El Roi” God sees their condition and has given them an identity and a hope that affirms their presence and self-value.

The “Heart” of a Black Woman

In forming the social and religious identity and roles of Black women, it is critical to understand how stereotypes and caricatures influence the portrayal of Black women. As stated in *The Cultural Production of Evil*, by Dr. Emilie Townes,

¹⁹ Phillis Isabella Sheppard, “Social Trauma and Public Spirituality: A Womanist Relational Ethic of Spiritual Practice,” in *Kaleidoscope: Broadening the Palette in the Art of Spiritual Direction*, ed. Ineda Pearl Adesanya (New York: Church Publishing, 2019), 136–62

²⁰ Phillis Isabella Sheppard, “Social Trauma and Public Spirituality: A Womanist Relational Ethic of Spiritual Practice,” in *Kaleidoscope: Broadening the Palette in the Art of Spiritual Direction*, ed. Ineda Pearl Adesanya (New York: Church Publishing, 2019), 136–62.

²¹ Cannon, *Katie’s Canon*. 19.

...these perceptions are more fantastic than reality and have an imagination that conjures worlds and their social structures that are not based on supernatural events and phantasms, but on the ordinariness of evil, that helps to hold systematic, structural evil in place and spawns generation after generation. One stereotype that is a product of this imagination to give you a sense of how the fantastic hegemonic imagination works— Aunt Jemima.²²

Unfortunately, even in this present day, Black women have to continually fight to dispel these types of stereotypes to ensure positive and affirming identities that change the trajectory to represent Black women with accuracy and depth and transcend to legacies to come. Dr. Emilie Townes asserts, “We must name ourselves with precise righteousness and ornerly love blending justice and truth, relentless faith, and moral brass to create, shape, and name an identity that is forged on the hope found in those who eminently remain.”²³ Contrary to the profitable marketing campaign of a fictional and “denigrating hegemonic construction”²⁴ of Aunt Jemima, I contend the truth and reality at the heart of a Black woman is a caregiving and nurturing spirit. Aunt Jemima emerged from an imagined normative whiteness steeped in nurturing systemic oppression and profitable gains, while devaluing the perception of Black women and their slave experiences. For Black women caregiving and survival are not forms of entertainment. This alternative reality egregiously undermines the truth of how Black women authentically operate with intentionality in caregiving and nurturing, often having to use their intelligence and creativity to make a way out of no way, with strength and determination through continuous adversity to uplift their families and communities.

In contrast to a fantastic hegemonic imagination, one of the four womanist theological tenets offered by Founder Alice Walker, is embracing the traditional capability and diversity of

²² Emilie Maureen Townes, “The Cultural Production of Evil: Some Notes on Aunt Jemima and the Imagination,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 30–42.

²³ Townes. 42.

²⁴ Townes. 39

the wholeness of entire people. Women loving and affirming traditional universalism, depicting the commitment to survival.²⁵ Black women have proven their traditional capability in this sense, from as early as the period of enslavement, as stated in Cannon's work,

Having only from midnight to daybreak to provide love and affection for her own offspring, the Black woman returned at night with leftovers, throwaways, discarded shells of the white slave owner's rubbish to the small, crude, squalid dwelling where she made a home for her family. Often she took into her quarters Black children whose parents had been sold away from them or they from their parents with the full knowledge that she could expect to have her own offspring with her for a few years, at the most.²⁶

I am aware of many Black women who nurture and care for other family members' children as if they were their own. I have an Auntie, on my paternal side of the family, who is the fifth child of thirteen children. Her task as a child was to help her mother, my paternal grandmother, with raising her eight younger siblings. In adulthood, my auntie raised her own five children and then raised five grandchildren because of the unfortunate choices of her own children. Many stories such as this are at the helm of the real-lived experiences of the caregivers and nurturers that hold our families together to demonstrate the heart of Black women and the importance of keeping the family together, despite the disruption of families from our past and the current attempts of destruction of families in our present.

Beyond the identity of wife and mother, aunt, and grandmother, which attests to their womanism in the family structure, another very crucial and current role in the formation and social construct of the Black woman is what I name as trailblazer. As a trailblazer, she

²⁵Floyd-Thomas, Stacy. "Womanist Ethics: Identity Formation as a Spiritual Discipline." VDS Doctor of Ministry Program. March 4, 2023. Video. [S. Floyd-Thomas – Womanist Ethics – Lecture.mov | Powered by Box](#)

²⁶ Cannon, *Katie's Canon*. 20.

demonstrates intelligence, integrity, and intentionality in her work and service as community activist and community leader.

The Black woman as educator attended Sunday services at local churches, where she often spoke in order to cultivate interest in the Black community's overall welfare. Churchwomen were crusaders in the development of various social service improvement leagues and aid societies. They sponsored fundraising fairs, concerts, and all forms of social entertainment in order to correct some of the inequities in the overcrowded and understaffed educational facilities in the Black community. These dedicated women substantially reduced illiteracy among Black people. The religious consciousness of the Black freedwoman focused on "uplifting" the Black community. The Black female was taught that her education was meant not only to uplift her but also to prepare her for a life of service in the overall community. It was biblical faith grounded in the prophetic tradition that helped Black women devise strategies and tactics to make Black people less susceptible to the indignities and proscriptions of an oppressive white social order.²⁷

The Black woman's consciousness of uplifting and serving the community with excellence in the midst of challenge and segregation is pervasive in our current reality. It is worthy to mention the three notable Black women, Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, Mary Jackson, honored for their dedicated work as mathematicians, known as "human computers," in the work at NASA to calculate the numbers that would launch rockets, and astronauts, into space.²⁸ Their stories were published in the book, *Hidden Figures*, by Margot Lee Shetterley and then produced into a movie of the same name. These trailblazing women exemplified the resistance to societal norms and proved Black womanist consciousness as defined by Alice Walker, "as an interpretive principle, the Black womanist tradition provides the incentive to chip away at oppressive structures, bit by bit."²⁹

²⁷ Cannon. 24.

²⁸ Margot Lee Shetterley, *Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race* (Harper Collins, 2017).

²⁹ Cannon, *Katie's Canon*. 29.

Trailblazers were in the foreground of raising social consciousness to the concerns of Black women and rising to the challenges through activism. Women such as Sojourner Truth, Jarena Lee, Mary Church Terrell, Phyllis Wheatley, and Nannie Helen Burroughs, to name a few, were instrumental in this initiative. All of the organizations founded by Black women were a direct result of social and racial injustices surrounding women issues. This predicated the emergence of the context and nature of a national Black women's club movement that produced many Black women's organizations, generally during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Black women organized the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in 1896, by merging the Afro-American Women and the League of Colored Women to establish a socioreligious movement against race, gender, and class oppression while working for the advancement of all Black people.³⁰ Black women engage activism and undergird their stories and lived experiences through this movement by highlighting the importance of education to demonstrate their self-determination to raise consciousness and awareness of the concerns of Black women and all people.

During this women's club movement, sororities, such as Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. (which I am a proud member, along with the Hidden Figures Women) was founded in 1908 as the first Black Greek-letter sorority, by nine Black women at Howard University in Washington DC. to ensure betterment in the Black community by embracing the ideology of sisterhood, service, and scholarship. Today, 116 years later, Alpha Kappa Alpha still exists with more than 120,000 active members to uplift, lead, and serve communities through change, education, and advocacy.³¹ These organizations highlight the importance of education and

³⁰ Marcia Riggs, *Awake, Arise, & Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1994).62.

³¹ Earnestine Green McNealey, *Priceless Pearls: Dimensions of Sisterhood and Service in Alpha Kappa Alpha*, 8th ed., 2017.

activism to improve the plight of Black women and enhance the role of social justice in the Black community. The Black women's club movement and sororities continue to be integral paradigms needed for the essential work to continue to develop trailblazers in the Black community to raise awareness, advancement, and advocacy for human rights and mental wellness.

With all of the pressures and challenges, struggles for ongoing survival, from our cruel and disparaging past, at the heart of Black womanist consciousness is value, love, and passion for home, family, church, and community. The real-lived experiences and richness of diversity encapsulate the heart of the matter, the "ordinariness"³² of everyday life in the identity formation of Black women.

The Soul of a Black Woman

Womanist theology ascribes one of its four-part tenets to embracing the cultural inheritance that vividly resonates in Black communities. Walker describes womanism as loving the culture of food, dance, and the Spirit.³³ To fully comprehend the moral life and faith wisdom of Black women, it is necessary to tap into what centers the moral agency of this group. As Marilyn Richardson wrote, "Religious faith gave Black women strength, courage, comfort, and above all, a vision that was at once creative, intellectual, and pragmatic."³⁴ Black women understood that it was prudent to maintain a socioreligious perspective, grounded in a faith that was innate to their soul, to advocate for social justice that diminishes the external and internal dimensions of Black oppression. As God-fearing Christian women, Black women rely on the

³² Townes, "The Cultural Production of Evil: Some Notes on Aunt Jemima and the Imagination." 38.

³³ Floyd-Thomas

³⁴ Riggs, *Awake, Arise, & Act*. 54.

narratives and Gospel writings of Jesus, as the authoritative source to compel them to act and to prevail in soul liberation for themselves, the legacy of Black women, and the Black community.

Reading Dr. Pierce, I discovered she and I have several parallels in our stories and similar experiences in our early spiritual formation. When I was a little girl, I remember growing up in a Brooklyn store front, small Pentecostal church. My mother was Baptist, and she and my siblings and I would go to the Baptist church most Sundays, but there were times when we would go to the Pentecostal church with my auntie (the one I mentioned earlier) and my cousins. Those were the Sundays when we would spend the whole day in church. We would go to Sunday School, morning worship service, and then afternoon worship service. We would have dinner at church before the afternoon service began. It was at the Pentecostal church where I first took notice of the “ladies in white.” The ladies dressed in uninterrupted white (from head to toe) were the Church Mothers. These were the women who were known as the prayer warriors, the faith leaders of the church who were not ordained but were considered the Holy women. These were the women that ensured the traditions of the church were honored, such as all girls and women under the age of seventy had to wear the lace doilies to cover their heads while worshipping in the sanctuary. The Church Mothers were the ladies who also anointed the heads of the younger women and girls, like me, with oil during prayer line time. They ensured that younger ladies and girls were wearing clothing that covered their bodies: skirts were long, and blouses buttoned up without showing too much skin. Girls were not permitted to wear makeup or nail polish. Everything about these women favored “faith forward” at all times. They had a steep belief in being a witness for the Lord and a deep-rooted belief that women should practice holiness at all times in service and in attire.

I remember my Sunday School teacher, Sister Jones, (that was how we addressed the older women in the church) was also a Church Mother. I admired Sister Jones and was often intrigued by her when she would worship the Lord with the Holy Dance. I had come to learn that the Holy Dance and speaking in tongues (the heavenly language) were usually outward signs from the Church Mothers and signified their holiness and close relationship with God. This was their theology, and they were deeply rooted in their beliefs. The Church Mothers were older Black women, who were faithful, strong, resolute, and garnered respect and authority. They were the women who gave pearls of wisdom, shared their experiences through testimonies, and usually had permanence in the church. Womanist theologian, Yolanda Pierce, refers to them as “the power brokers in African American congregations.”³⁵ They are the backbone of many Black churches across Black denominations, although they are not called Church Mothers in all denominations. These women of faith could be considered protectors or defenders of faith. While their theology of holiness seemed rigid and based on a code of conduct that could have theological misinterpretations to the trained theologian and scholar, these women were primarily concerned with protecting young ladies and girls from the wicked ways of the world that often had little to no regard for the bodies or presence of Black women. These were the women who took the responsibility of protecting the soul of the Black woman to heart because of their own lived experiences and firsthand knowledge of the trauma that could be encountered and was encountered by some of them.

The ladies in white galvanized together with an inner source of strength and courage to protect the next generation of Black women by ensuring the world knew they were daughters of the church. These women were earthly guardian angels for young women and girls, training them

³⁵ Pierce, *In My Grandmother's House*. 16.

to be soul-bearers and soul-winners for Christ. At the age of 15, my mom and I joined the AME Church. However, I remain grateful for those ladies in white, the Holy Women, who covered me spiritually in my formative years, as I have developed in ministry to this point.

Brokenness and Blessedness of the Black Church

One of the many resounding thoughts from my reading Dr. Pierce's book, *In My Grandmother's House*, is the paradox of the brokenness and blessedness of the Black church, as aptly described by Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III, senior pastor and activist. Understanding the humanity of the church and the spirituality of the church as singular elements that work together creates a space to contextualize womanist thought as a powerful move towards life-giving cultural moments for Black women clergy.

Embedded theologies reflective of cultural trauma influence mental wellness for Black clergy women. Cultural trauma, defined by Phillis Sheppard, is a disruption in group connection and identification to that group's values and cultural practices. The societal events and systemic cultural practices have produced negative impact to the individual and to the cultural group to whom they belong."³⁶ These challenges, unfortunately are not limited to societal and government institutional systems but are inclusive of the Black Church.

The Black Church has served as a longstanding steeple of hope and liberation in the Black community. However, for Black Clergy women it cuts like a two-edged sword. On the one hand the church offers training and education through the Scriptures, serving as the focal point that shapes, structures, and solidifies sustainment in Black life. On the other hand, the church ascribes to the oppressive systems that face the Black community in its interactions with women.

³⁶ Sheppard, "Social Trauma and Public Spirituality: A Womanist Relational Ethic of Spiritual Practice."

This paper will focus on the obstacles gleaned in the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC) in regard to the value consciousness of women clergy. As an ordained minister in this faith tradition, I can attest firsthand to the struggles and needs of women in this religious institution.

The AME church was founded in 1787 in the face of racism and slavery. It was born out of a theologically and sociologically redemptive need that transcends Wesleyan doctrine. The AME church attests to the biblical commitment of liberation, reconciliation, and justice.³⁷ The church is rooted in a steep patriarchal structure, which influences the roles of leadership for women in many aspects of ministry. The leadership of the church is comprised of twenty Bishops, of which are predominately men. The church elected its first female Bishop at the 2000 General Conference. The current Council of Bishops comprises three women and seventeen men. Since the 2000 General Conference there has been a total number of five women to serve as Bishops of the church. Further at the local church leadership levels, the Presiding Elder serves as the highest clergy member of the local district, appointed by the Bishop. My District had its first female appointment to Presiding Elder in 2022. At the local Pastoral level, there is more visibility for women Pastors. However, the equity in appointments is varied and often disparate. For instance, women pastors are usually assigned to the smaller, more challenging congregations. These congregations are usually far in distance, which compounds the situation of gender oppression. The dynamics of gender is often played out in the distribution of leadership on local and conference committees.

³⁷ The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, The AME Sunday School Union, 2021.

The church has many organizations to support the mission and vision of the larger (connectional) church. Pertinent to this writing, is the AME Women in Ministry (WIM) organization. This organization's purpose is to support women in ministry by encouraging equity and opportunities for women at all levels of church involvement. A primary goal of WIM is to continually bring awareness of the implications to the long-standing history of disparate inequity and the current reality of stressors to forge a way forward to support positive mental health and culturally responsive care for Black women clergy.

Barriers to Wellness

The above sections intended to provide a solid grounding in comprehending the social construct and identity formation of Black women. This understanding adopted a womanist perspective and points to an identity that has been shaped through the dynamic complexities and nuances of Blackness from the past and the present. Womanist ethics help bring clarity to explore how the challenges impact the identity and instruct the behaviors of clergy women, particularly in mental wellness. There are inherent challenges and many obstacles that contribute to the determinant factors that present as stressors and risk factors in the personal well-being for Black clergy women. Some of these include, intersectionality (racism, colorism, sexism), sexual/domestic violence, burnout, compassion fatigue, Black Superwoman mindset, bi-vocational ministry, lack of family support (single, motherhood, single parenting), and continuing education. This is not an exhaustive list; however, it provides great insight into the determinants that influence barriers to wellness. I would like to define and detail three of the stressors that I opine as having a salient impact in this regard to AME women clergy.

Burnout is described as a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who

work with other people in some capacity.³⁸ In my experience, this is a major indicator that perpetuates the negative impact on the mental wellbeing of Black women clergy. It often results in ineffective coping skills that exacerbates the burnout. “Clergy impairment, reduced effectiveness, and attrition have numerous negative effects on clergy themselves, their congregations, and communities.”³⁹ Research and lived experiences reveal the critical need to prevent and address burnout for this profession.

The Black Superwoman (BSW) phenomenon, which is often used interchangeably with the Strong Black Woman (SBW) theory gives rise to the notion that Black women are equipped to be resilient and independent in facets of their being (economic, social, emotional, and spiritual), are held to a higher standard, and are encouraged to take on more responsibilities than their counterparts. In achieving this standard of excellence and rising to the occasion, they often sacrifice their own well-being without regard to emotional release and support. In her article on BSW and mental health, Janee R. Avent Harris asserts, popular media images and historical narratives purport this stereotype as complimentary, with implications of strong self-reliance and caring for others, while rejecting the space for vulnerability, emotional transparency, and expression. “In fact, their vulnerability or any admission of struggle could be viewed negatively, calling into question their competence and strength.”⁴⁰ This alludes to emotional and

³⁸ Christopher J Adams and Holly Hough, “Clergy Burnout: A Comparison Study with Other Helping Professions,” *Pastoral Psychology* 66, no. 2 (April 2017): 147–175, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-016-0722-4>. 148.

³⁹ Adams and Hough. 150.

⁴⁰ Janee R. Avent Harris “The Black Superwoman in spiritual bypass: Black women's use of religious coping and implications for mental health professionals” *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*, (2021), Vol.23.No.2,180-196 <https://doi.org/10.1080/19349637.2019.1685925>

psychological distress, which impacts physical health implications of chronic illness/disease and can trigger potential maladaptive religious coping.

Compassion fatigue occurs as a response to stress and increases the potential breakdown in mental health. Often times it is a complex stress response, as it relates to being open to or moved by the suffering and pain of others. A definition offered by Charles Figley describes it as being biologically, physiologically, and emotionally affected by the trauma experienced by others, as well as from workload stress. The burden of ministry and the institutional and organizational factors of the AME church contribute to the unfortunate implications of mental health challenges.

The pressures of women clergy in the AME church are many. I believe women clergy can transcend their lived experiences to human flourishing. By embracing a long faith, an enduring faith, in the tradition of our ancestors, using our cultural inheritance of music, women clergy can create a counterculture within our religious spaces. I encourage women clergy to use their lived experiences as an invitation to draw intimately to God to better understand their value and presence. An intentional culturally-informed integrative self-care practice such as ACT is an entry point to begin the work of intimacy and becoming well. The following sections of the paper will unpack and demonstrate that while we hold the brokenness in the church, there is a way to move forward, with cultural connection, to a blessedness that points to human flourishing and mental wellness.

A Black Woman's Soul Sings.... "He restores my soul" (Psalms 23:3)

I grew up in a singing tradition, a singing family, and I also sing. I can remember at the large holiday gatherings at my maternal grandparents' house, my grandfather, aunts, and uncles,

would join in harmonic song after the meal, as the family would relax in the kitchen or family room. Songs like “Oh, Mary, Don’t you Weep,” “ Precious Lord,” and “Amazing Grace” filled the room with sweet melodic aroma. Those were some of the most precious memories of my childhood. This section will center on the impact of theological connection and womanist reflection as it relates to the cultural inheritance of music and dance as a vital part of greater self-care, wellness, and human flourishing for Black women clergy.

As Christians, our identity is rooted in the fact that we are a redeemed people, called to make glorious the name of Jesus Christ. Music can be regarded as an agent of a resounding call from deep within and resonates as a great equalizer to humanity-giving rise to the emotions that compel us to feel (melody, rhythm, beat) and to speak, sing (lyrics)- which soothes the soul, satiates the spirit, strengthens the heart, and sustains the mind; while it chronicles the story of lived experiences, unfolds personal theologies, and weaves together cultural and spiritual dialogues to give insight to a world that often watches with a distorted view. The music of our ancestors centers us to respond and reflect authentically in the Black faith tradition. The inclusion of music in life-giving practices such as integrated self-care will keep Black women clergy connected to their culture and remind them of the faithfulness of a God who notices them and will keep them in their present.

James Cone, a Black liberation theologian, in his book *The Spirituals and the Blues*, makes this assertion about music and the Black community:

Music has been and continues to be the most significant creative art expression of African Americans. Blacks sing and play music as a way of coping with life’s contradictions and of celebrating its triumphs. We sing when we are happy and when we are sad; when we get a job and when we lose one; when we protest for our rights and when the formal achievement of them makes no difference in the quality of our life. Singing is the medium in which we talk to each other and make known our perspectives on life to the

world. It is our way of recording and reflecting on our experiences- the good and the bad, the personal and the political, the sacred and the secular.⁴¹

Yes, music is in the fabric of our Black life and being, more specifically to this project, I focus on the hearts, mind, and souls of Black women clergy. Music matters in the life of black women. Like Cone, I argue, it is in our DNA and it is the heartbeat and significant life-giving force to add richness to the quality of Black life. In addition, I argue that music serves as an enduring voice to create spaces for equity, diversity, and inclusion in a world and in a Black world that still demands responsive reaction. The blessedness of this in the AME Church is that Black women clergy currently engage in cultural artforms, such as song, dance, poetry which can be purposefully connected to evidence-based practices, such as mindfulness or meditation to invite authentic engagement.

In womanist theology, Stacey Floyd-Thomas describes it as a cultural inheritance of women loving music and culture that enabled them to cope with the bondage and devastation of slavery.⁴² The challenge to womanism in this regard is how will we allow our music to "restore our souls" (Psalm 23:3) as we confront the challenges of gender oppression and sexism in our sacred spaces, whether it is church, home, work, or any place we deem as our space. In the Psalms, David reminds the believer to take comfort and delight in God's goodness.⁴³ It is a Psalm of encouragement that reclaims our relationship to God and provides reassurance that God, a God all-sufficient to all intents and purposes, is a provider to believers and will restore our souls when we doubt, wander, or get weary. Restoration of the soul is a revival to keep us from falling, to keep us from fainting; we would have fainted unless we had believed the

⁴¹ Cone, James, *Spirituals and the Blues* (S.I.: ORBIS, 2022), 133–34.

⁴²Floyd-Thomas, Stacy. "Womanist Ethics: Identity Formation as a Spiritual Discipline." VDS Doctor of Ministry Program. March 4, 2023. Video. [S. Floyd-Thomas – Womanist Ethics – Lecture.mov | Powered by Box](#)

⁴³ Matthew Henry and Thomas Scott, *Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989).

goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.⁴⁴ God grants provision in many ways. Consider, through a womanist lens, music is a provision that influences the trajectory to transformative thought. So then, why should we feel discouraged, why should the shadows come; we can confidently sing because we are happy, sing because we are free, and know God's eye is on the sparrow and know that God is watching us. Excerpts from the following poem, *Wisdom Rocked Steady*, by Nancy Lynne Westfield⁴⁵, gives emphasis to this conclusion:

Wisdom rocked steady in her mahogany chair
Purple floral cotton dress draped mid-calf at her varicose veins
Wisdom stirs clears her voice then takes a deep breath
rocking back & forth
I stretch to listen afraid I will miss some bit of truth
Rapt by her soothing voice we begin by singin, hummin, moanin'
together
At the CrossAt the Cross Where I First Saw the Light
In Times Like These You Need An Anchor
Blessed Assurance Oh What a Foretaste of Glory.....
During the singin, hummin' moanin' She looked deeply into my eyes &
she spoke to me with conviction
“Our freedom is not out there/it is in here”
she lays her hand on her own bosom
She says with audacity still gently rocking herself

“Our freedom does not rest with the good will of Mr. Charlie &
Miss Anne
Our beauty is not measured by Massa's wife nor his girlchilids
Our salvation is not in the hands of the White Woman's Christ”

Baby you gotta act grown up
act courageous
even when you feel skirred

“We got to keep expanding, keep moving, keep going to the next
level

Baby concern yourself about others & their struggles-keep loving, love our own strength
But not to the hurt of our own souls-love yourself—

⁴⁴ Henry and Scott, 376–77.

⁴⁵ Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, ed., *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society, Religion, Race, and Ethnicity* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), xv–xvi.

inside & out, no matter what, no matter what ...no matter what
—love your Self

An interpretative reflection, anchored in Alice Walker’s first definition of womanist—
"from womanish, like a woman"—suggests the poet makes a sober supposition that womanism
prescribes a courageous, audacious, and mature attitude to ensure Black women’s voices are
never again silenced or marginalized. Undergirded by the *dunamis* power of the hymns and
biblical truths, we can infer that God will restore our souls when we’re tired, scared, hurt, or
even disillusioned, to do the necessary work of “stretching out into the outskirts of God’s
eternity”⁴⁶. We must affirm our reality and presence and not allow the ideas of anti-oppression-
“otherness,” “less than,” and “not belonging” -to invade our spirit.

We should pause, reflect, and question why, when a majority of women are being called
to ministry in African Methodism, is there still in the twenty-first century, this pervasive gender
oppression towards them? This is the embodiment of faith seeking understanding. It is incumbent
upon both, our Black sisters and brothers, to ensure that the trajectory moves towards the
continuum of love and inclusion, modeled by Jesus’ acceptance and honoring of women. After
all, the Scriptures teach that in the fullness of time, God sent his Son Jesus, born of a woman that
we might receive salvation.(Galatians 4:4) It was the acquiescence of Mary in concert with God,
as proclaimed in Mary’s Magnificat, her song that reminds us of the miraculous wonder and
power of God that changed the world. (Luke 1:46-55) And let us not forget that it was the
women who first saw the risen Lord early in the morning, as recorded by the gospel writers.

It is in this mind, the mind of Christ, that womanist scholars, described by womanist
theologian Stacy Floyd-Thomas, as “*real* women (mothers, daughters, sisters, lovers, partners,
church women, religious women, spiritual women, working women, educated women, wise

⁴⁶ Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues*, 23.

women, leaders, and servants) who first and foremost understand what they do not only as a career or profession but also as a calling and vocation”.⁴⁷ In furtherance, the calling fulfills the prophetic work of ministry. The fullness and inclusiveness of the Christian ministry declares the Spirit is poured out on all people whereby men and women will prophesy. (Joel 2:28) In this regard, it is prudent to support women leadership in the church, just as we continually fight for this right in secular professional careers.

In Kelly Brown Douglas’ “Twenty Years as a Womanist: An Affirming Challenge,” she expresses the role womanism plays in her privileging and keeping at the center the real lived experiences of Black church women in her role as preacher and scholar of religion. Douglas opines,

...that womanist epistemological orientation must enable Black women to claim their voices and spaces, as well as to carve out their places from which “true knowledge” (knowledge that liberates rather than oppresses, knowledge that creates moral agents rather than further embeds people in existing power relations) can emerge. Womanism for our time is rather a praxis of solidarity and of building relationships and allies, both within Black communities and among womanist, Black, feminist, and other liberationist scholars and communities. And more importantly, it is an epistemology that will continually strive to delve deeper.⁴⁸

Womanism offers that space and a place to give voice to privilege and center the real lived experiences and cultural values of Black women clergy. Womanism has energized me to delve deeper and convinced me to “raise my voice like a trumpet” (Isaiah 58:1), to support the mental health and sanity of Black women clergy. As noted by Katie Cannon in her commentary on womanist scholars, “we beg the macroquestion “who is God?” and the microquestion “how is God acting in the social fabric of our lives?”⁴⁹ That is to say, in appreciation of womanist traditional capability, we resist the status quo, the proclivity and passivity to accept our social

⁴⁷ Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple [Electronic Resource]*, 6.

⁴⁸ Floyd-Thomas, 9-10,12.

⁴⁹ Floyd-Thomas, 26.

location as bottom feeders enmeshed in repetitive oppressive domination. Instead, we are compelled to energize upstream to create revolutionary life-giving experiences in our persistence to be defenders of a faith that includes us. For if women clergy are to have a true awakening of their souls in our beloved Zion, we must stay committed to a vigorous perseverance of faith seeking understanding. We must create space to reveal the truths to the challenges of intersectionality of Black women clergy and persevere in our social and religious cultures to furthering an incessant advocacy for a robust dialogue. A dialogue centered on reconstructing knowledge of the normative gaze of patriarchal hegemony that seeks to limit the value consciousness of Black women clergy.

In the Black church, historically, music played and continues to play a vital role in the lived experiences of the soul of Black people. “In spite of every form of institutional constraint, Afro-American slaves were able to create another world, a counterculture within the white-defined world, complete with their own folklore, spirituals, and religious practices. These tales, songs, and prayers are the most distinctive cultural windows through which we see the nature and range of Black people’s response to the dehumanizing pressures of slavery and plantation life.”⁵⁰ One of my professors at Howard University School of Divinity, Dr. Delores Carpenter, a prominent liturgist, scholar, and editor of *The African American Heritage Hymnal* asserts, “Over the last two decades, the gospel tradition of Black music has been universally embraced as an authentic art form. It has become one of our primary cultural exports to the world. The African American Heritage Hymnal holds promise of strengthening that conclusion.”⁵¹ The hymnal ascribes to the different genres of black music, including spirituals and anthems, such as “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” which is famously known as the Black National Anthem. These songs

⁵⁰ Cannon, *Katie’s Canon*. 13.

⁵¹ Carpenter, Delores. *African American Heritage Hymnal*, 1st ed (Chicago: Gia Publications, 2001).

are central to black lived experiences and remembers the historical past and reflects a renewed hope in a faith that encourages better days to come.

This creative vision emanates through song as current generations have engaged in a variety of musical and art genres to share their stories of cultural and spiritual experiences and to communicate their theology and understanding of God in their lived experiences. As noted by author and scholar Cheryl Townsend Gilkes in her contribution to Cone's work, "Over the years, we have learned more about Black history and the specificities of the impact of trauma and its healing. Black music is connected to the activism in creating "sacred spaces" to be responsive to the diversity in the Black community.⁵² Music, regarded by Rev. Dr. Renita Weems, womanist theologian and scholar, as a "revolutionary movement" inclusive of inter-generational and inter-relational community⁵³, reveals the work of influencers like Marvin Gaye, with his timeless song, *What's Going On* during a political time of war and protest in American history. This song, like the ancestral spirituals, served as a cultural window to the world of the troubled minds and souls of Black Americans concerning this tumultuous period. The present realities of Black life and the deep investment towards human dignity and social justice, place emphasis on the importance of the spirituals' influence as a response to oppression, which evoke emotions to "make you wanna holler and throw up both your hands," as Marvin Gaye's lyrics still resonate in Black lived experiences.

In contrast, the womanist perspective imparts the significance of a robust response that illumines an indwelling that is greater than what is portrayed in the world--"greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world." (1 John 4:4) The spirit and strength of the response are

⁵² Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues*, xvi.

⁵³ Rev. Dr. Renita Weems, Sermon: "Where Are the Smiths?." Genesis 24:1-10 Alfred Street Baptist Church, Alexandria, Virginia. November 12, 2023.

centered on the solidarity of a community of believers who do not lose faith in the faithfulness of God.⁵⁴

Womanist theologians embrace the rich diversity of Black church music. Black church music tells the stories and realities of Black women and the Black experience through the ages, engaging the stereotypes, and reflecting an incarnation of love, strength, courage, and power.⁵⁵ Musical artist Andra Day communicates this through the lyrics in her song “Rise Up.” The lyrics express the relationship of hope and empowerment in Black life realities and gives rise to music as a therapeutic force for Black women. It embraces the theology of the restoration of the soul “in the continuing search for a positive, productive quality of life for women under God’s care.”⁵⁶

You're broken down and tired
Of living life on a merry-go-round
And you can't find the fighter
But I see it in you so we gonna walk it out
And move mountains

And I'll rise up
I'll rise like the day
I'll rise unafraid
And I'll do it a thousand times again

The rise of popular music such as hip-hop music exposes the political and societal order for Black life through a “musical-talk,” as James Cone references it, to engage discourse about life in the Black community.⁵⁷ The evolution of Christian hip hop music interacts with building and connecting a strong religious faith. Both are examples of how music transcends through the

⁵⁴ Cone, 54- 55.

⁵⁵ Floyd-Thomas, Stacy. “Womanist Ethics: Identity Formation as a Spiritual Discipline.” VDS Doctor of Ministry Program. March 4, 2023. Video. [S. Floyd-Thomas – Womanist Ethics – Lecture.mov | Powered by Box](#)

⁵⁶ Williams, Delores S. *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1993), 105.

⁵⁷ Cone, 134.

generations to impact Black theology and influence Black purpose. Artists like John Legend and Common sing, “We sing, our music is the cuts that we bleed through, somewhere in the dream, we had an epiphany” from the song “Glory” from the 2014 historical film *Selma*, incorporating hip-hop music, to exemplify the stories of slavery, Jim Crow, civil rights, Black Lives Matter, and a resounding faith that embraces a victorious and liberating hope for survival in the Black experience.⁵⁸

In the article, “Women Hip-Hop Artists and Womanist Theology”, the author, Angela M. Mosley proposes there is a symbiotic relationship that reflects the artistry of these artists that speak to music as an idea of finding our center and to the transformative power of a creator and its extraordinary creation, the Black woman.⁵⁹ “Applying the principles of Womanism, Black female hip-hop artists like Queen Latifah and MC Lyte draw from the continuing ancestral spirituality to create a complete bond to engage in everyday life without considering White supremacy’s subjugation through tainted Christianity.”⁶⁰ That is to say that these female hip-hop artists audaciously use their innate gift of voice, through hip-hop music, to confidently defy the roles that are constantly forced upon them to uplift women and to create a safe space in Black community. They manifest the prophetic knowledge of Proverbs 18:16 that assures their talents will make room for them as they do the work, Mosley terms, “born from the soul” to encourage activism. “Womanism’s hip-hop provides space for Black women to write their own story, challenge with purpose, and demand the dominant powers to engage in dialogue while actively progressing society in the performative of change.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ See Appendix 1 for full song lyrics.

⁵⁹ Mosley, Angela M. 2021. "Women Hip-Hop Artists and Womanist Theology" *Religions* 12, no. 12: 1063. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12121063>

⁶⁰ Mosley

⁶¹ Mosley

Liturgical dance is another creative artform, demonstrated in Black churches to convey theology, strength, resistance, courage, and comfort through music and dance. Dance leans into wellness and self-care by inviting one to learn to connect with the body and breath awareness. Freedom of movement invites flexibility and openness to engage the environment, present moment, and reduce stress. It invokes God's character to permeate through the music and movement, speaking collectively and individually, expressly dramatizing the lyrics to emote the sense of sight in this incarnation of love through an inter-related liberation theology and worship. Dr. Eboni Marshall Turman, womanist scholar writes, "Black womanist eschatology delights in Morse's treatment of Barth's exhortation to locate eschatological significance in the strange interruptions of the world by first appealing to Alice Walker's "loves dance" as definitive evidence of womanist identity in order to decidedly assert black dance as the pro-fanum divinatory imagination that mirrors the "parabolic truth of the basileia of heaven's reality" for black women in the black church".⁶² Songs such as: "*Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*"- *Tune my heart to sing thy grace, let thy grace Lord....bind my wandering heart to thee*" and "*Break Every Chain*"- *There is power in the name of Jesus to break every chain...There is an army rising up to break every chain...I hear the chains falling...*" are powerfully demonstrated to remind Black women to trust in God and believe that God has good intentions and knows the plans for our lives that point to hope and a future. (Jeremiah 29:11). The creativity in Black music and dance draws the soul into delighting in liberation that is foundational Black theology and creates space for the reimagining ethos of Womanist theology. As stated by Turman,

⁶² Turman, Eboni Marshall. "Moving Heaven and Earth: A Womanist Dogmatics of Black Dance as Basileia." 121.

Beyond the hegemony of text, black sacred dance reveals a future that is “not yet” through the bodies of black women who en flesh the reversal of the present order. In the poetic sensibility of sacred dance one observes the reconstitution of black women’s bodies that are normatively counted as “last” in relationship to the “first” place of black men in the church. To reach one’s arms up while spiritually cast down, to stand while emotionally bowed over, and to sway back and forth in the attempt to rock steady while mentally shaken by the turbulence of the multiple practices of gender discrimination in the black church is black women’s embodied act of faithful disbelief that affirms that there is another way; a way whereby every valley really is exalted and the crooked places really are made straight (Is. 40:4); a way that is not yet but is coming in defiance of black women’s “real world” in the church..⁶³

For we are confident that God who has begun this good work within us, will bring it to completion.(Philippians 1:6) The reality of this understanding substantiates the claim that the liberating Word of God is working and communicating through all literary forms-written, spoken, lyrical, and dance. “As both the sophisticated vocabulary of professional black performance and the improvisational social movement that emerges from within communities of African-American descent, black dance is an embodied and “in-body” lexicon that functions as a primary source for the task of womanist theological reflection. Black dance as the phenomenological there-ness of a black body that silently articulates within the creative matrices of dominant forms is divinatory imagination at its best.”⁶⁴ In other words, the creative artform of Black dance is an illustrative testimonial to the intention of the goodness of God. It is a sacred moment of direct communication and connection with God. It emanates the power and presence of God and serves as a path forward to liberation and human flourishing.

Dr. Herbert Marbury expounds in his module work, “Creation Story as Community Care,” the fundamental character of God, described in Genesis 1 the refrain *TOV*, meaning “good” cannot be broken.⁶⁵ Marbury indicates God’s intention for creation is good and nothing that happens

⁶³ Turman, 123.

⁶⁴ Turman, 124.

⁶⁵ Marbury, Herbert. “Creation Story as Community Care.” VDS Doctor of Ministry Program. January 7, 2022 .Video [Marbury - Creation Story as Community Care - Lecture.m4v](#) | Powered by Box

historically or in the present moment can alter God’s fundamental character because God hovers over us (Genesis 1:2).⁶⁶ In other words, God stays with us and what God created “in the beginning” is still good in the present despite the chaos, brokenness, devastation, or opposition. The lyrics “you won’t break my soul” in the song “Break My Soul” by Beyonce’ resounds in remembering God’s intention. It infers God’s fundamental goodness hovers over black women as affirmation that black women can rebuild, reimagine, and reconstruct to be reclaimed by the goodness of God. “Our epistemology of hope is grounded in the notion that change, refram-ing, re-thinking, re-imagining, re-naming, re-structuring, re-conceiving—birthing anew, is not only possible but also necessary.”⁶⁷ It demonstrates the efficacy of the Word of God can effectuate anything with excellence and better than we can do, hope, or imagine for ourselves. With that assurance, our God given creativity, coupled with the ancestral knowledge of our mothers, sustain a continued hope for a future that entails a more excellent way, a way of human flourishing as God’s good intention.

The formation of the soul of the Black woman is understanding the Black prayer tradition, the embodiment of the Church Mothers, to be the authentic living bridge between Black women’s stories, Black women’s music, and Black women’s source of faith. The soul of a Black woman is the strong cultural inheritance of a people who are empowered to P.U.S.H.--praying until something happens-- singing, dancing, testifying, and preaching the scriptures.

Womanist theologian, Delores S. Williams, in her book, *Sisters of the Wilderness* notes, “postbellum Black people have a sense of isolation of one’s self (more especially one’s mind) from competing forces and withdrawing in fervent prayer, meditation, and fasting to experience an encounter with God that leads to transformation not primarily of a person’s more secular bent

⁶⁶ Marbury, *Creation Story as Community Care*

⁶⁷ Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple [Electronic Resource]*, 134.

but primarily transformation of human relationships in a wide world.”⁶⁸ While pushing through towards resilience and resistance, black women amplify hope and care for their souls. They must always stay cognizant of the realities that impede human flourishing to prevent falling into the traps and the snares that diminish and devalue them. Through activism, black women stand on the foundational premise of the spirituals and the theological reflection of soul restoration to rise up victoriously in hope and to reach the fullness of their humanity and mental wellness. Centering on committed actions for values living, a rich cultural heritage, and an openness to God, self, and others will enhance engagement with a culturally-informed approach to integrated self-care. This further supports a womanist response that affirms Black women’s faith and invites healing for Black women’s soul.

This discussion around music and dance demonstrates vital ways that these artforms engage black culture and religious tradition in the trajectory towards transformative thought around using evidence-based practices in self-care. Music is a cultural inheritance. It is an inter-generational force that centers on life-giving practices of restoration, reflection, and recording of Black women’s stories, to cause us to create a counterculture worldview that reflects the greater spirit that works within. Connecting to the spirit within empowers women to embrace a therapeutic force that creates safe spaces to uplift, strengthen, heal, affirm, and love themselves in an authentic manner. It reminds us that broken souls can be blessed. This is the backdrop that sets the stage for the radical and redemptive capacity for reimagining.

⁶⁸ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 106.

Suffering and Redemption: Black Women in the Struggle

The story of the Black woman's struggle: *The struggle is real. The struggle is ongoing. The struggle is toxic. The struggle is challenging. The struggle is faith-filled. The struggle is compelling. The struggle is survival. The struggle is activism. The struggle won't last always.*

Womanist theologians champion that Black women must refuse to remain silent or to maintain whispering voices in interactions with those who perpetuate oppression dominance and not allow them to have the final authority about their humanity and mental wellness. Turman cosigns this supposition in stating, "Sexism in the black church is the antichrist. It is "the nothingness" that opposes (not prevents) heaven's inbreaking insofar as it seeks to "usurp rule and authority in the place of heaven itself" (Eph. 6:12). Sexism in the church attempts to control women according to a deadly and delusional patriarchal norm that defies the eschatological prerequisite that radically prefers "whosoever."⁶⁹ This is to say that gender discrimination or any oppressive force is in direct opposition to the liberating gospel of Christ. A gospel that ascribes to a compassionate God who proclaims that love, justice, and equality are inseparable companions. This Godly mentality moves us towards an inclusive nature of the fullness of the Christian ministry. It is an invitation for the women of God to engage in a relentless persistence to the heavenly truths of a glimmer of glory.

Womanist theologian Delores Williams' book, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, centers on the biblical story of Hagar found in Genesis.⁷⁰ Williams ascribes the story of Hagar as a symbolic depiction of the suffering and redemption of Black women. The story of Hagar attests to the brokenness and blessedness of the Black church. Hagar was abused and misused by those whom she served. She was a single mother and had personal encounters with God in her wilderness

⁶⁹ Turman, 123.

⁷⁰ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 3.

experience that taught her how to survive in the struggle. Like Hagar, this is the lived experience for many Black women and have been for centuries. For Black women, Hagar’s story models “personified resistance.”⁷¹ Hagar is the only person in the Hebrew Bible who gives God a name. She references God as “El Roi-The One who sees me.” (Genesis 16:13) Hagar affirms the importance of the visibility of Black women in the attribution of El Roi to God. This sacred moment exemplifies Hagar’s strength, perseverance, risk-taking, and determination that offers a powerful posture of perpetuity for womanhood. It further personifies the audacious, courageous, and mature attitude of womanist cultural moments that compel Black women to not simply survive but to thrive--ensuring self, family, and communities have fortitude for wellness and flourishing.

Becoming Well

The previous sections attempt to expose and “to engage the “living space” of Black women’s complex and dynamic moral agency amid tripartite oppression at the intersections of race, gender, and class.”⁷² Further, it brings awareness to overextended lives and the spirit of busyness of “church work.” This often pervades and overtakes their lives and eventually leads to mental and emotional illness (as mentioned, burnout, compassion fatigue, and superwoman syndrome) and sometimes physical illness as well. Additionally a deeper analysis and theological reflection of the cultural artforms of music and dance, the patriarchal structures and culture of the Black Church, coupled with womanism and intersectionality, aim to reveal a more informed understanding of the ethics around self-care. This intentional attention affirms greater awareness of the need to create mentally healthy clergy communities.

⁷¹ Williams, 107.

⁷² Cannon, *Katie’s Canon*. 5.

This section will seek to introduce culturally-informed evidence-based practices, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Mindfulness, as resources to help Black women clergy provide self-care to mitigate barriers to mental wellness and raise consciousness to employ approaches to complement self-care and human flourishing. In the end the goal is to offer a strategy to implement an integrative approach to evidence-based practices and mental and emotional wellness. By foregrounding the methodology of a womanist framework while integrating mental health evidence-based practices, the appeal to embrace a positive and productive quality of life will be more effective. In so doing, it will also impact spiritual maturity and developing an intimate relationship with God. It is imperative for Black women clergy to be mentally healthy and spiritually fulfilled to effectively lead others to the Kingdom of God.

As Black women clergy continue to learn, understand, and proudly proclaim our identity, we have to make explicit connections to our cultural and spiritual past to gain insight to identify relevant models for mental health to engage this present age and years to come. In this section, I argue for the Black cultural resonance of music in order to establish a lifestyle engagement of integrative mental health practices.

In the last section, we saw the great cultural and faith resources of music for black identity and care. Here, we have an opportunity to make even more explicit the significant connections between self-care and spiritual songs. Dr. Darrell Griffin espouses in the book *Soul Care*, there are three commonalities in the connection of self-care and spiritual songs: (1) both embrace a holistic approach for soul care; (2) faith and hope are the central attributes that point to encouragement and better days; and (3) the centrality of the theme of God, which is the

primary focus of the transformative relationship.⁷³ Scripture teaches us to take great concern for our mind, body, and soul. We are reminded to pray that in all respects we may prosper and be in good health, just as our soul prospers. (3 John 1:2)

The dichotomy between the *brokenness* and the *blessedness* of the church underscores the deep-rooted challenges in self-care. In the context of the *brokenness* of the church: the hegemonic ideologies that perpetuate gender oppression; and the *blessedness* of the church: the assertion that womanist thought helps Black women clergy “to illuminate a moral wisdom that maintains a fervor for life even in the face of unrelenting oppression,”⁷⁴ the ancestral spirituality and legacy of music and spirituals have provided an identifiable entry point to self-care.⁷⁵ The integration of evidence-based practices and the discipline of self-care will center the experiences of Black women clergy and provide liberating soul care. Attention to spirituality and self-care establishes a trajectory to redeem their lived experiences and for engagement of positive resistance to the status quo.

Through the years, the lived experiences of Black women have unequivocally revealed the importance of holistic, culturally informed healing practices. Despite the struggle and strain of our past and our present, the shaping of Black women has ushered us towards mining the mind for sanity and hope to overcome.⁷⁶ As Monica Coleman notes, “Our healing must attend to our context, our voices, and our empowerment so we can not only survive but thrive.”⁷⁷ With this in mind, a womanist contextualization of evidence-based practice in self-care, particularly for black

⁷³ Barbara L. Peacock, *Soul Care in African American Practice* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2020) 23–24.

⁷⁴ Cannon, *Katie’s Canon*. 5.

⁷⁵ Peacock, 82.

⁷⁶ Kimberly Lewis, “Mining the Mind” Paper (DIV 8038) 2024.

⁷⁷ Coleman, Monica A. *Bipolar Faith: A Black Woman’s Journey with Depression and Faith* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2022). xvii.

women clergy in the AME tradition, is the pathway forward to awakening the soul to becoming well.

The RESET: Integration of Evidence Based Practices

Reflecting on testimonies from many clergy women as well as my own, there have been two germane questions that stifle our human flourishing and abundant life which God desires for us. (John 10:10) The questions of why we are so reluctant to put ourselves first? And why do we feel guilty when it comes to providing self-care for our self-preservation? Seeking responses to these questions (and many others) will unearth research-based strategies for renewal and “gentle invitations” for a reset when we are experiencing spiritual and emotional deficits.⁷⁸ Introducing a reset of the mind is essential to the transformative power of integrative self-care, in concurrence with creativity, music, dance, culture, and a liberating faith.

In advancing the idea of thriving, I have chosen to utilize the principles of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) as the foundational evidence-based practice to integrate in clergy self-care for this project. ACT can interrelate with the ethos of the inherited cultural traditions of Black creativity in artforms of music and dance to offer space for revival. “ACT seeks to enhance human flourishing, or what it calls psychological flexibility. ACT ascribes to “living meaningfully, engaged in values-directed actions, even in the presence of pain.”⁷⁹ This assumption dovetails engagement with womanist thought to support psychological flexibility to choose to resist oppressive forces despite the longstanding struggle. Additionally, ACT has interconnectivity with mindfulness, an evidence-based approach that yields added benefits to self-care and wellness and

⁷⁸Conversation with Dr. Melissa Snarr, January 19, 2024.

⁷⁹Nieuwsma et al., *ACT for Clergy and Pastoral Counselors*, 187.

can be seen inherent in the blessed cultural resources of the Black church. I will discuss more on mindfulness later in this section but turn here to underscore the importance of contextualization.

It is common for most people to have ambivalence and reticence when introduced to something new. This is especially true in the Black church, with its appropriate skepticism towards the history of oppressive health care systems. At the forefront of mind, it is prudent for me to align evidence-based practices within the cultural context of womanist theology and Black church traditions. Pointing to our rich cultural heritage of music, the womanist perspective, and incorporating more acceptable religious language like “soul care” and “sacred space” may help to minimize reluctance in implementation. Additionally, introducing the ACT processes in small increments and building up to maximizing potential is a necessary strategic step towards implementation.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

ACT engages core processes that target psychological flexibility or choice by seeking to explore the relationship an individual has with his/her thoughts which influence the person’s behaviors. Introducing the first element of opening up engages the processes of *acceptance* and *cognitive defusion*. Acceptance implies having a willingness to experience all that life has to offer freely, without judgment or engaging in avoidance.⁸⁰ In a cultural context, this may look like exploring a willingness to experience something new and not allowing the past struggles to inhibit the pathway forward. Acceptance leans into acknowledging the pain and surrendering to God through the music, the essence of the spirituals. Cognitive defusion engages detachment and attachment. We learn to detach from or hold less tightly to thoughts, emotions, or actions that

⁸⁰ Nieuwsma et al., 187.

would discourage meaningful actions and attach to that which will support values-directed actions.⁸¹ Cultural implications here could look like detaching from unrealistic expectations, the Black Superwoman phenomenon, stress and anxiety that fuel compassion fatigue and burnout. Once detached from these negative stressors, we are available for attaching that space to something that draws us closer to God and moves us in the direction towards wellness.

Music is a force that can intentionally draw us closer to God and remind us of who we are in God. The engagement with music and movement helps us to discharge energy and attach to openness and awareness. Listening to the word of faith through music while moving the body and breathing deeply allows the body to open up and relax and calms the mind. Standing in a comfortable position with feet firmly on the ground, knees slightly bent and shoulders back, focus on coordinating breathing with moving the body, swaying, reaching out or up/swinging the arms, circling the neck, bouncing vigorously, tapping, stomping, or clapping aloud. Songs that are penned to Scripture, such as “My Help Cometh from the Lord” (Psalm 121) by the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir and “The Blessing” (Numbers 6:24-26) by Elevation Worship are particularly impactful. Meditating on the lyrics while engaged in a mind-body-spirit movement can resonate and increase our awareness of and openness to the presence of God. It brings us into a space to center and receive the blessings of God. This has resonance with the moves within the ACT matrix to notice the fluidity of psychological flexibility but contextualizes it within the church wisdom and practice as a way into greater self-care. We attach to the assurances that our lives matter, we are loved, and we are fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God. (Psalm 139:14) As we

⁸¹ Nieuwsma et al., 187.

attach to these realities, they ruminate in our hearts, minds, and our spirits to help us ultimately become healthier in our quest for wellness and self-care.

Introducing the second element of awareness involves engaging the practice of mindfulness to appreciate the processes of living in the *present moment and self-as-context*. In the ACT context, mindfulness is defined as, "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally."⁸² Mindfulness is used in developing the practice of living in the present moment, bringing awareness to emotions, feelings, thoughts around what is happening in the moment.⁸³ Cultural traditions can lean in to cultivating our hearts, minds, and soul to appreciate the working of the Spirit of God in the present moment. For example, many of us wake up in the morning and our minds are racing and worrying about the day before it has even started and usually leads us to becoming overwhelmed, stressed, and impatient. By noticing this, we learn to cultivate a morning practice, such as yoga, mindful breathing, meditative prayer (can include a spiritual song like "Ride on, King Jesus"), or walking to intervene and to refocus so we notice what is happening with our breath, our body, and in our mind. We notice what we are doing in the present moment. We cultivate a pattern of noticing that impresses upon us to quiet and slow down to notice how our body and mind feel. In this awareness, we are now able to notice the presence of God and can now best reflect.

Self-as-Context involves the perception of how one sees herself in a broad scope that gives agency to how she responds to life.⁸⁴ Womanist theology draws parallels to this conclusion by resonating the invaluable self-worth of Black women clergy in Scripture and in real-lived experiences, despite the normative gaze of systemic patriarchy and oppression. Incorporating daily

⁸² Nieuwsma et al., 187.

⁸³ Nieuwsma et al., 187.

⁸⁴ Nieuwsma et al., 187.

positive statements of affirmation that use scriptures to focus attention and/or writing them on cards to read out loud to yourself throughout the day and maintaining the position that God is Emmanuel (with us) generate protective factors for a positive self-perspective. Trying to visualize and feel the truth of the words help to combat negative thoughts and influence thoughts of self-worth. This practice centers on positive thinking and transcends inner obstacles to engage pathways to support a high regard for self and positive responses to life.

The third element of ACT introduces doing what matters most. It engages the core processes of *values* and *committed action*. It invites one to reflect on what is it that she treasures and to explore “moment-by-moment” commitment to take actions that move towards those valued directions.⁸⁵ In a cultural context, this reflects a dualistic outcome. The first is to intentionally identify what she would do personally to engage in a discipline of self-care around values. An example of this could be reflected in community service. For Black women, community is highly regarded as cultural, spiritual, and relational values. Interacting with other faith believers to focus on addressing problems in communities is empowering. One example is networking with national Food Drives to address feeding the hungry and reducing food desert areas as an action that supports values living. Collecting donated food items, bagging them, and bringing them to a food pantry for the homeless or for colleges for distribution is a humbling experience. Monthly gatherings with sorority or other community service affiliated groups or collaborating with mental health providers in the community to support mental health ministries also play a significant role towards thriving for Black women. These groups provide social, emotional, and spiritual support in service to others. We also find community in gatherings with family and honor the inter-generations.

⁸⁵ Nieuwsma et al., 187.

The second outcome could reflect how Black women clergy use their voices to perpetuate womanist ideals to re-construct knowledge and effect change that reflects equity, diversity, and inclusion in the church and community. During the liturgical season of Easter, the AME Church, like many other Black churches, observe Holy Week. During this time, there is usually a sermon series on the seven last words of Christ, where seven preachers preach one of the last words. Some churches have a midday service and an evening service. I offer as a gender inclusive approach, a sermon series reflecting the women at the cross, where women preachers proclaim around this theme. This could be offered in either the midday or evening service. In churches where there is one primary service, the series could alternate each year. This approach offers a broader scope of the Calvary event, is reflective of all who were there, and supports the re-imagining of an inclusive church. “ACT proposes a theological lens of integration for clergy to simultaneously address psychological and spiritual problems.”⁸⁶ Unfortunately, there are far too many Black women clergy, who are unwilling/unable to admit that these spiritual struggles exist and do not know how to intentionally execute a plan for reset and restoration. By introducing ACT, I offer an evidence-based practice for adaptation into daily living to help them live a life that fully reflects their values and moves in the direction of wellness and human flourishing.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness, as noted in the definition above, reflects the appreciation of the present moment. Mindfulness is used interconnectedly with the ACT model and can also be used independently in meditative practices. Dr. Ira Helderman offers this working definition of mindfulness: “a particular experiential state trained and cultivated, fully accepting awareness of

⁸⁶ Nieuwsma et al., 25.

and non-attached connection to present moment experience.”⁸⁷ This definition resonates with me as it implies one has to be trained to learn how to cultivate stillness of the mind to become fully aware of the present moment. One has to begin to mine the mind to work through the core processes of ACT to get to psychological flexibility. It is my contention that to help Black women clergy in successful self-care and mental health practices, engaging mindfulness is a quality way to quiet the mind from the many voices and the intersectionality that inherently occupy space in our minds. Relatedly, learning how to defuse/ quiet the mind and pay attention to the present moment of being, is the first start to flourishing in the mind.⁸⁸

Using a womanist approach to introduction, meditation and mindfulness includes both spiritually and culturally informed practices. This finding is in line with the National Board for Certified Counselors’ observation that integration of an “individual’s religious background is not only culturally responsive, but ethically responsive.”⁸⁹ Mindfulness identifies with and reflects the importance of breathing. It calls attention to the breath and invites one to explore and become familiar with breath awareness-noticing the inhale and exhale of the breath. In connection to singing and dancing, it is critical to understand the breath and how one breathes- the pacing and return of the breath, breathing from the diaphragm for deep breaths, when to notice and take shorter breaths. Mindfulness bends towards understanding the body through breathing, which is impactful in self-care. Taking deep breaths during the day will help reduce stress and anxiety and invite calm in your space. Mindfulness can be a great first step towards a systematic practice of holistic care.

⁸⁷ Helderman, Ira.”Mindfulness, Religion, &Healing.” VDS Doctor of Ministry Program. Video. [Helderman - Mindfulness - Lecture.mp4 | Powered by Box](#)

⁸⁸ Lewis, Paper (DIV 8038)

⁸⁹ Latunde, Yvette C. 2022. Deep like the Rivers: Black Women’s Use of Christian Mindfulness to Thrive in Historically Hostile Institutions. *Religions* 13: 721, 21. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13080721>

The practices could include affirmations, the use of specific types of music and movement, dance, quiet time, prayer, walking, time in nature or engaged in a relaxing activity, and writing or reading.

Understanding breathing invites us to tap into the mind to make connections to the intentionality of breathing. Mindfulness guides us to flexibility of choice to breathe new life into situations. In Black cultural music traditions, there is a pattern of call and response, or antiphony in musical terms, that is used to invite a community of participation to engage in the fullness of the music. Many of the spirituals were sung in this pattern and it still resonates in the present. I propose that mindfulness in the context of Black women clergy, reflects the pattern of call and response to invite the fullness of self-care. The antiphonal moment here is not to just evoke the sound of the call but to provoke a shift in the response. In other words Black women clergy will engage in a practice of breath awareness as a profound shift in self-care. I invite women clergy to imagine the call is to intentionally (inhale) be a change agent in the spaces we occupy. The response is to (exhale) breathe new life into us, into our spiritual disciplines and practices, into our church, and into our communities. Spiritually, God uses seasons of antiphony in our lives. Whether it's a call to new ministry, new disciplines, or new spiritual practices, the response should reflect confidence that God will breathe freshness and new life as we endeavor to fulfill our calling.

Transformative Thinking into Action

In this final section of the paper, I write my plan towards the path to becoming well: engaging self-care, as my project implementation of a self-care group for Black women clergy in the AME Church. I have chosen the name for the group as “The RESET Gathering.” RESET indicates the stopping and slowing down to gain clarity for moving forward. RESET invites space for renewal, revival, restoration, reconnecting, and refreshing. As the group prepares to RESET,

the invitation is to engage in self-care practices that will reflect practice in daily living, change in lifestyles, and perpetual moments to RESET to live their God-ordained best life.

Prayer and meditation are familiar spiritual disciplines to the RESET group. I will introduce mindfulness through the discipline of prayer and meditating on a scripture. In the introduction, I will make connections to our cultural heritage, bringing awareness to the inclusion of the African diaspora, where mindfulness has some of its roots in the Yoruba culture.

Historical documents on the Yoruba peoples suggest various applications of mindfulness including the use of drums, stomping, and clapping, all forms of grounding. The contemporary literature suggests that these ancient practices fall under the category of MBSR, and specifically discharging or grounding. These practices, as well as attention to the breath, spending time in nature, paying attention in particular ways, artistry, and raising consciousness of a higher power, are common for Yoruba people, and part of their everyday culture.⁹⁰

I will secure a space in a local church to gather the women for a face-to-face group session. Initially, I will invite my network of clergy girlfriends to take part in the group, with aspirations to venture out to other clergy women in the AME church. At the first meeting, I will introduce the purpose of the group and explain the biblical call to intentionally take care of the body-the temple of God (1 Cor.6:19-20). I will then move on to explaining the physical and emotional dangers and harmful effects of living a life without intentionality in self-care. Discussing the stresses of ministry and the inherent stressors pertinent to AME clergy women (as noted in sections 1 and 2). I will invite women to share their stories around stress to cultivate a supportive culture and camaraderie of assurance that none of the women are alone. It is important to begin the support group by knowing and sharing the stories of each member.

⁹⁰Latunde, 2.

Additional mindfulness practices that are cultivated in cultural traditions could include but are not limited to: prayer as mindful meditation, guided or free-style meditation, reflective or justice-centered writing, the use or creation of music, music and movement, yoga, community, stillness, creating rituals focused on wellness, opening their minds, “saluting the sun,” and the collective pursuit of liberation and justice. These practices are more reflective of what Black women regard as beneficial mindfulness practices to them.⁹¹ With that understanding, it is important to include practices that are culturally-informed to achieve optimal engagement. Other mindfulness practices will include Body Scan Exercise and Body Awareness to focus on the breath and body. Scanning the body allows one to get to know the feelings they experience more clearly and to respond with compassion.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

This will be the last evidence-based practice used in the implementation stage because it interrelates with mindfulness. It would be prudent to have basic understanding of mindfulness and some practice, and then include ACT. I will introduce ACT by explaining that is a newer evidence-based approach to psychotherapy and that we will explore the practice in a non-clinical approach. It will complement the self-care already in practice and offer a deeper understanding of how to interact with your feelings and emotions. Ultimately the idea is to help each woman to live an expansive life and provide empowerment, healthier relationships with self and others, and a deeper sense of self purpose and fulfillment.

After explaining the core processes and the basic tenets of ACT, I will invite the women to an open discussion around the following question prompts. I have associated each question

⁹¹Latunde, 2.

with one of the ACT core processes to help make explicit illustrations of how to interpret and understand the ACT hexaflex.

Discussion Questions to implement ACT principles in daily living:

- What are your values as a woman, clergy, and care provider? (V)
- In what ways have you erased yourself as a woman? (SC)
- In what ways have you minimized your voice and remained silent? (SC)
- How have you abandoned yourself/values in certain spaces and why? (SC, V)
- What messages of unworthiness do you hold? (CF)
- How has seeking validation, approval, or attention compromised you being your authentic self? (CF, SC)
- How can you honor yourself and your chosen vocation by offering your authentic self to the work of ministry? (SC, PM)
- What practices will you engage in to keep yourself in a state of wellness? (CA)
- What are you willing to do and what is the cost to you to maintain wellness? (CA)
- What do Black clergywomen need for a healthier space in ministry? (PM)

Lastly, I will introduce the ACT Matrix as a tool in the discussion group to help members notice how behaviors influence psychological flexibility either by moving away (avoidant behaviors, inner experiences) or moving towards (committed actions) values living.

ACT Matrix:⁹²

<p>3. What does it look like/what do you do when this stuff shows up/you move away? (avoidance behaviors = away moves)</p>	<p>4. What could we see you do/what does it look like when you are moving towards who and what is important? (committed actions)</p>
<p>2. What [inner experience] stuff shows up and gets in the way</p>	<p>1. Who and what is important to you? (Values/things you move toward)</p>

⁹²This is the Matrix in a question-based form, by Benji Schoendorf. It assesses values, painful inner experience (a.k.a. "hooks"), and avoidance behaviors, and focuses on committed actions

of doing what matters to you? (inner obstacles)	
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As the women engage in discussion around the responses, they will begin to see and understand how their feelings and thoughts influence their behaviors. For this activity, I could also provide the feelings wheel to help women delve deeper into their emotions. Using the feelings wheel to help name and notice emotions in conjunction with the matrix increases the opportunity to exhibit behaviors that move towards values.

Additionally incorporating cultural connections using ACT principles in the local church setting could look like women clergy using language that makes women visible in prayers, such as: “God, who loves us like a mother and a father; The God of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar; Isaac and Rebekah; Jacob and Rachel and Leah.” In the AME Church, the worship leader usually recites the first verse of a morning hymn. This is known as “lining the hymn.” Hymns are written in masculine gender. Women clergy worship leaders can intentionally line the hymn using gender inclusive language. Intentional ongoing engagement in these small, yet significant acts, help women to raise their voices to proclaim their presence in the sacred space of the Black church. This in turn substantiates their contribution and belonging, which transforms their self-care.

Connections with Women in Ministry Leadership (WIM)

Connecting with WIM primarily would be an outreach to continue to support mental health, diversity, and gender equality in the local churches. Currently the WIM leadership conducts monthly virtual sessions around various topics to support and educate women clergy. Leading a mindfulness practice in each of the monthly sessions, either at the beginning or end of

the session, adopts self-care as part of daily practice. Also, I will propose specific topics that support this project as named in above sections and present a workshop or talk reflecting self-care and integration of ACT and mindfulness, to include mindfulness practice. Providing training to teach WIM representatives from each conference to lead engagement in the practices, in her respective conference, ensures continual practice.

Concluding Thoughts

As I reflect on my call in this work, I am passionate about inviting my fellow clergy girlfriends to engage in better self-care. What I have done in this work is to center Black women clergy on their values, which are deeply rooted in a rich history and culture, to empower them to break free from oppressive and destructive forces that prevent and hinder human flourishing. They now have an instructive setting that allows them to transcend damaging experiences and negative perspectives, conquer their weaknesses, and understand their value, as they grow spiritually and emotionally. The new pathway forward awakens the hearts, minds, and souls of Black women clergy to becoming well so that they show up well. It represents added value to a legacy of love, resiliency, and optimism in service to self, others, and an egalitarian God who sees us.

I am assured that employing culturally-informed integrative self-care practices as a daily discipline will yield far-reaching benefits and will cultivate a faith that reveals a glimpse of the eschatological vision. In my reimagining the AME church, I envision a church that embraces inclusion and diversity, gender equality, gender-inclusive language in liturgy, sermons, prayers and songs, support for mental health ministries in the local church, engagement in community collaboration and interfaith ministries for mental health, and an authentic honoring of women

and all of God's ordained servant leaders. In concert with the prophetic message, (Hab 2:1-3), I am confident if I write the vision, and make it plain, at the appointed time it will surely come.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1-*Glory* Song Lyrics, John Legend and Common

One day when the glory comes
It will be ours, it will be ours
O-oh, one day when the war is won
We will be sure, we will be sure
O-oh, glory (Glory, glory)
O-oh (Glory, glory)

Hands to the Heavens, no man, no weapon
Formed against, yes glory is destined
Every day women and men become legends
Sins that go against our skin become blessings
The movement is a rhythm to us
Freedom is like religion to us
Justice is juxtapositionin' us
Justice for all just ain't specific enough
One son died, his spirit is revisitin' us
Truant livin', livin' in us, resistance is us
That's why Rosa sat on the bus
That's why we walk through Ferguson with our hands up
When it go down we woman and man up
They say, "Stay down", and we stand up
Shots, we on the ground, the camera panned up
King pointed to the mountain top and we ran up

Now the war is not over, victory isn't won
But we'll fight on to the finish, and when it's all done
We'll cry glory (Glory), oh glory (Glory)
O-oh (Glory, glory)
We'll cry glory, oh glory (Glory, glory)
O-oh (Glory, glory)

Selma's now for every man, woman and child
Even Jesus got his crown in front of a crowd
They marched with the torch, we gon' run with it now
Never look back, we done gone hundreds of miles
From dark roads, he rose, to become a hero
Facin' the league of justice, his power was the people
Enemy is lethal, a king became regal
Saw the face of Jim Crow under a bald eagle
The biggest weapon is to stay peaceful

We sing, our music is the cuts that we bleed through
Somewhere in the dream, we had an epiphany
Now we right the wrongs in history
No one can win the war individually
It takes the wisdom of the elders and young people's energy
Welcome to the story we call victory
The comin' of the Lord, my eyes have seen the glory

One day when the glory comes
It will be ours, it will be ours
O-oh, one day when the war is won
We will be sure, we will be sure
O-oh, glory (Glory, glory)
O-oh (Glory, glory)
O-oh, glory (Glory, glory)
Hey! (Glory, glory)

When the war is won, when it's all said and done
We'll cry glory (Glory, glory)
O-oh (Glory, glory)