

South University

**Strategies to Reverse the Decline of Black Males Attending
the New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church**

A Proposal Submitted to
The Faculty of the College of Theology
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry
Department of Theology

by

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CHAPTER TWO

This ministry project's ~~primary~~~~primary~~ focus will be New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church. New Prospect is a mid-sized, traditional, African-American Baptist church located at 1939, 9th Avenue, Meridian, Mississippi. It is affiliated with the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc, 1700 Baptist World Center Dr, Nashville, TN 37207. New Prospect is a predominantly African American church and its racial demographic ~~make-up~~ resembles the ~~neighborhood~~~~neighhood~~ it serves. New Prospect ~~has~~ a congregation of about 200 members, with approximately 165 active members. The gender demographics of the membership is 65 percent female ~~and~~, 35 percent male, ~~with~~ the male population also including youth and teenage males. The most significant age demographic is the 45 to 60 age-group, which makes up about 45 percent of the congregation; the 1 to 35 age-group is the next largest and makes up approximately 40 percent of the membership. The senior members, aged 65 and over, make up only 15 percent of the congregation.

The History of the New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church

New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church has a long and complicated history. Keeping in mind, this history has not been well documented in the historical archives of the church or the city of Meridian, ~~Mississippi~~ archives. The poorly documented written history is one of the many challenges the researcher ~~encountered~~~~ineountered~~ with this ministry project. Because of the poorly documented history, it is difficult to determine the roles and significance Black Men played in the church's history.

With that said, as with many African-American Baptist churches in the rural South, most of New Prospect's history is verbally passed down from generation to generation, because ~~around~~~~during~~ the time the church was founded in 1910, very few African Americans could read and write. Therefore, ~~the~~ history of New ~~Prospect~~~~Prospect~~ is imprecise and incomplete at best, with

very little -written documentation. Just as in many other cases in history, when ~~it~~ history is passed down verbally, there may be some ~~embellishment thrown~~ ~~embellishment was thrown~~ in, to add some spice and excitement to the story. ~~This~~ ~~which~~ may be also ~~be~~ the case with New Prospect. Be that as it may, the history of the New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church ~~history~~ is as follows:

The church was organized in 1910 due to a schism that involved the members of the Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church, 1803, 10th Avenue, Meridian, Mississippi 39301. A small group of parishioners left Mount Zion, and moved less than a mile away and one street over ~~from Mount Zion~~. Mount Zion, which is on 10th ~~A~~venue and New Prospect is on 9th ~~A~~venue. Interestingly, the two churches are in such close ~~in~~ proximity ~~to each of each~~ other ~~that~~; one can easily see the front door of Mount Zion Church from the back door of the New Prospect Baptist church. This small group of parishioners took a leap of faith and launched a new church, and named this church ~~is~~ New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church.

Based on the limited historical data available, one can surmise that the New Prospect Missionary Church was born out of the conflict, disagreement, and misunderstanding between church members and the church leadership at Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church. According to the limited history, the split from Mount Zion Baptist Church was due to the lack of trust and ~~transparency~~ ~~transparentey~~ of the church leadership. —As a result of the many years of disenchantment, a group of people began looking for a new beginning. This desire for a fresh start was etched in the minds of this pioneering group, and in 1910, this pioneering group orchestrated the split from Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church, and started New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church.

As in every church split, there has to be a core group that led the split, and this split was ~~led~~ ~~lead~~ by Reverend Samuel Moore, El and Maggie Lofton Wicks, and Ed and Kizzie Evans. The

small group was ~~so~~ determined to succeed, and although they had ~~ve~~ a proper place to worship, they met in different homes on the third and fourth Sunday of each month, to keep the church afloat.

Because of the popularity and influence of this pioneering group, several more families left Mount Zion and joined this ~~fledgling~~~~fledging~~ ~~new~~~~start-up~~ church. Reverend Samuel Moore, El and Maggie Lofton Wicks, and Ed and Kizzie Evans, named ~~d~~ this new ~~c~~Church, New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church, a name that spoke of the desires of the original members, to ~~have a~~ ~~new~~~~have-new~~ start. Undeterred by ~~meager beginning of~~ New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church ~~meager beginning~~, these dedicated and committed people had a vision for ~~the future~~~~is-new-church~~, and ~~were~~ ~~determined~~~~determined~~ to see this church succeed. Out of this determination came great stories of New Prospect's beginning, ~~including~~~~like~~ many oral stories that have been passed down ~~from~~~~omf~~ generation to generation. ~~T~~here may be some aggrandizement, but based on the history and culture of the rural South in Mississippi at this time, one can see that these stories have a solid foundation of truth.

Some of the most inspiring stories are ~~the~~ ones that are told about physically building ~~of~~ the new church. After meeting in homes for several years, the members ~~s~~ decided to build a permanent place of worship. ~~One~~ of the most memorable stories is about ~~the~~ Coleman family, which was one of the largest families in the New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church at ~~the~~~~is~~ time. The members of this family proudly tell the story of their grandmother, a woman by the name of Mrs. Willie Mae Pratt; she was the first female to dig a full shovel of dirt in a groundbreaking ceremony, a task that was ~~usually~~~~usally~~ reserved for men. The Coleman family story is not the only one; ~~;~~ there are many other inspiring stories passed down from generation to generation about the women of the church.

One story told in the history of New Prospect is ~~this;~~ after a long day of working in ~~the white people's~~ homes ~~of white people~~ as maids ~~for very little money~~ or teaching at the segregated school without ~~the~~ adequate resources to give their students a proper education, the women of the church would still muster up enough strength at the end of their day to collect water from the neighborhood creek and carry it long distances to the men who were mixing cement to set the bricks for the new church building.

These stories ~~raise~~~~raises~~ an interesting point, since the inception of the New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church, women have been a pivotal part of the ~~church's~~~~churches~~ success. According to fragmented records found in the archives of New Prospect, ~~women~~ ~~the women of the church~~ have been in the forefront of the church, from participating in the groundbreaking ceremony to physically helping build the church, ~~as well as~~~~and~~ cultivating evangelism to increasing the number of members in the church, through community activities.

Concerning the role men played in this church, there is minimal recorded history of Deacons or a Deacon Board; although there ~~is~~ some indication that a Deacon Board existed, such history did not emerge until much later in the church's history. Based on existing historical information, there are few mentions of men and their various roles in this church during its infancy. Stories about the men and their leadership role in the church are almost non-existent. However, there are some exceptions, such as the stories of the founding pastor and a few deacons, which will be addressed later in the history of New Prospect.

Although the split from Mount Zion was orchestrated and led by Reverend Samuel Moore, his tenure with New Prospect was short-lived. Despite this ~~short tenure~~, he did oversee the completion of the church building. There is no mention in the history ~~of whether or not~~ he died or just left the church. He was succeeded by Reverend Henry Mosley. There is limited historical

information on Reverend Henry Mosley, but one can conclude from the information that is available that this was a time of discontent in the New Prospect Church family. Reverend Mosley's leadership style was not compatible with the members of the church. His leadership style led the church family to become spiritually barren, and the church members ousted him as their pastor.

Reverend Mosley was not to be taken lightly; he recruited those members that were loyal to him and formed Mount Herman Baptist Church, on 1702 9th Avenue, just down the street from New Prospect. Reverend Mosley was the pastor of New Prospect for only a short period, ~~yet~~ he was able to garner enough support to split from the church. The questions to be asked here are "Where were the men during this time?" "Where were the spiritual leaders who should have taken the lead to keep the church from fragmenting?" It is sad to say that there is no mention of any men trying to hold the church together or trying to reason with the families that left New Prospect. A church can sustain itself for a short time without a Pastor, but it will eventually drift into chaos without strong leadership and its members will eventually leave the church.

Over the next few years, New Prospect experienced a period of uncertainty. The church was under the leadership of three different pastors for three brief periods: Reverend C. J. Boykins, Reverend W. M. Burton, and Reverend Richard H. Pack. Unfortunately, there are no church records of any significant spiritual growth or development during this time. In the church's history, this time could be best described as a time of wandering in the wilderness with no clear vision for the future of the church. There is a ~~recurring~~ theme in the history of New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church: during ~~times~~ of wilderness in the church, the only male mentioned was the Pastors.

After Reverend Richard H. Pack's dismissal in 1930, New Prospect elected Reverend A.H. Hardaway. According to the limited history, this was a time of growth and stability for the New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church. Reverend Hardaway was known as the "Spiritual Engineer," who had a well-thought-out blueprint for both spiritual and numerical growth of the church. Under his leadership, the membership nearly doubled to over 150 members and the church was remodeled, with a fellowship hall added. It became one of the first African-American churches in Meridian, Mississippi with an indoor baptismal pool. Having an indoor baptismal pool may not seem to be a great accomplishment now, but it is important to consider the era this accomplishment ~~took~~ place. African-Americans experienced staunch segregation, violence, Jim Crow laws and poverty in Mississippi; most African-American churches baptized their members in a local pond or ~~the~~ Okatibbee River, and even then there were many that did not want African-Americans to use public waterways. Therefore, having an indoor baptism pool in the church is a remarkable achievement for this era in our ~~nation's history~~ ~~nation history~~. This ~~baptism~~ ~~baptism~~ pool is still used today.

More importantly, under Reverend Hardaway's leadership, Christian Education and Sunday School became the driving force of the church's ministry; ~~B~~by evangelizing the neighborhood and making the youth ministry more attractive to children in the community, the church experienced d both physical growth and spiritual growth. Even with all of the gains made during Reverend Hardaway's almost four decades of leadership, the role of the men in the church remained trivial, insignificant, or rarely documented. One would have to assume that there were men who were members of the church, but there is no documentation of any strong male influences. Based on the history of the church, there was at least one associate minister and various other men in the congregation. The only ~~one~~ man that was mentioned by name in the historical

archives during Reverend Hardaway's tenure ~~is~~: George Hasley, the man who built and installed the baptismal pool. Although men were barely mentioned during Reverend Hardaway's tenure, Reverend Hardaway did leave the church with an adequate leader. After Reverend Hardaway's unexpected death in 1966, the assistant pastor, Reverend Robert Frank Hopson, was asked to continue Reverend ~~Hardway's vision~~~~Hardway vision~~ and legacy.

Reverend Hopson helped the church cope with Reverend Hardaway's unexpected death. Reverend Hopson was already a part of the church and was familiar with the congregation, so unlike previous transitions, this transition went smoothly. Reverend Hopson was very similar to Reverend Hardaway, in that he believed~~s~~ in evangelism and community outreach. In 1973, Reverend Hopson was formally elected as the pastor of New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church. Reverend Hopson was innovative and acted in the best interests of the church. He continued the remodeling trend that Reverend Hardaway started, and his accomplishments for a rural African-American church in Mississippi during the late 1960s and early 1970s were unprecedented. The church purchased new church pews, a sound system, central heating and air conditioning. Making these improvements to its worshipping facilities was very unusual for an African-American church in Mississippi, but for New Prospect, it was a church determined to improve and succeed.

~~B~~~~The~~ beginning ~~with Reverend~~~~of Reverend~~ Hardaway's tenure in 1927 and through Reverend Hopson's tenure in 1976, New Prospect had been at the forefront of social and economic change in Meridian and Mississippi. New Prospect experienced both communal and economic growth during Reverend Hopson's tenure and became known in ~~the~~ African-American circles as a "Silk Stocking Church." This term was used in the South among African-American people to describe a church that the more affluent members of the community attended. Despite this time of considerable spiritual growth and prosperity, the tenure of Reverend Hopson at New Prospect

Missionary Baptist Church came to an ~~abrupt end because~~~~abrupt because~~ of his death after only nine years of service.

Once again, New Prospect faced a time of unrest and anxiety. The congregation was coping with the death of a pastor and ~~athe~~ future filled with uncertainty. The feeling of anxiety has become very ~~familiar~~~~fimilar~~ to New Prospect, ~~as they~~ once ~~again face~~~~again they face~~ a void in leadership. This lack of leadership in the church is making finding a successor difficult, it is the same theme that has ~~ed~~ haunted the church from the beginning; a lack of male leadership.

The lack of male leadership was not the only challenge that New Prospect faced. Similar to many rural, African-American, Baptist churches, New Prospect was at a crossroads: ~~in~~ the early 1970s, there was a new breed of preachers emerging. The astutely educated Bible preacher was falling by the wayside and replaced with the emotional and rhythmic “whooping preacher.” “Whooping” is a rhythmic style of preaching in the African American Church, where the preacher sings his words. Whooping Preaching is somewhat a chanting, melody; it also uses a call-and-response, to reach the crowd, such as somebody ~~saying~~~~say~~ ‘yesssss’, ~~and~~ the crowd would respond ‘yess.’ This rhythmic style drew large crowds in both the northern and southern African-American churches. Furthermore, in most areas in the rural South, if a man could sing or “whoop,” he could quickly become a pastor, even though many of these “whoopers” did not have any higher education or theological training in their background.

New Prospect fell into the same pastoral trend as other African-American Baptist churches. In 1977, New Prospect elected a sharp-dressed, handsome, former quartet singer named Reverend Eddie B. Cryer. Reverend Cryer ~~who~~ was known in the local preaching circles as one who had a “sweet whoop” because the rhythm of his words was like the cadence of a finely tuned instrument.

Unlike his predecessors, Reverend Cryer understood the value of having strong men in the ministry. He ordained eight men into the ministry, as well as three deacons and one trustee. He established a strong Brotherhood, which is a group of men that did not hold an office in the Church, but helped support the church. These men were involved in all activities in the Church and the upkeep of the facilities. Of course, being a former quartet singer, Rev. Cryer made sure the male choir was active during his tenure, and it grew from about seven active members to almost twenty active members.

However, this whooping style of preaching had negative aspects: the whooping pastors would often become the center of the Church, which made many Churches Pastor centric; that which is to say that the Pastor had the final word and his word was law. Many African American Church members in the rural South were taught to obey this authoritarian style of leadership, and no one ever~~never~~ questioned the Pastor; the Pastor was the ultimate authority. and; what the Pastor said was the law in many churches. This ~~typetypes~~ of unchecked authority often led to dictatorial-style leadership, and according to the oral history of the Church, Reverend Cryer's tenure at New Prospect slowly became dictatorial in nature.

Under Reverend Cryer, New Prospect grew rapidly; however, one may surmise that his dictatorial-style of leadership resulted in a slow and steady decline of the congregation's confidence in him, resulting in his resignation from the pulpit after twenty-seven years of service. Even though his tenure marked the first legitimate period of male emergence in the Church, Reverend Cryer's leadership style was not inclusive or collaborative. ~~T,~~ the decisions of the Church, for the most part, were his and his alone.

After his exit from New Prospect, ~~L~~ Like several other pastors before him, Reverend Cryer split the Church ~~in July on July~~ 2004, and began a new church in the city of Meridian MS, taking

several members with him. His new Church is named the Greater Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church, 3312 Meridale Rd, Meridian, MS 39301, and it is located about three miles from New Prospect.

As Reverend Cryer was turning in his resignation, there was a young man named Reverend Paul Garrett who waited in the wings, poised to succeed him. However, there was a quandary over his successor. Reverend Paul Garrett, or Pastor Paul as he liked to be addressed, ~~he~~ was a young, charismatic preacher, but was not a traditional Baptist preacher; thus, he had no alliances with the Baptist Church. Despite this failing, New Prospect elected him as Pastor. On the one hand, the Church experienced tremendous growth during his tenure. The young people loved him, and he brought the Church back to prominence within the community. Pastor Paul was a forward-thinking pastor; he instituted praise teams and dance teams, licensed and ordained three ministers and ordained two deacons. He started the Corrine Evans Library and was heavily involved in raising money for the less fortunate. On the other hand, his unorthodox style alienated some New Prospect members and pastors in the area. Pastor Paul did not hold to the African American traditions and expectation of a pastor, from the way he dressed to the way he delivered his messages.

For example, during one Sunday worship service, he had an empty coffin in the sanctuary, in an attempt to add shock value to his sermon. However, this unorthodox way of making a point did not sit well with many members, especially the senior members. After four years of highs and lows, Pastor Paul resigned under a cloud of controversy. After Pastor Paul resigned, the younger, less spiritually grounded crowd left the Church. Incidentally, it makes one wonder the crowd's reason for coming to Church in the first place: to follow a man or to follow God.

Time marched forward to 2008; New Prospect experienced such an unstable history of pastors that they decided to take on a radically different approach to seeking out replacements. The

success of the Church depended on the commitment of their pastors. For the first time, in November 2007,² the Church formed a pulpit committee, headed by Deacon Ezell Wilson, who was ~~in~~ given the task to find a new pastor. The application for the role of church pastor stated that New Prospect wanted a pastor “who fully and holistically allowed God to order his every step. His walk with Christ must be devoid of selfish gains to enhance his pastoral career.” The Church also desired a leader who was well-educated and solely focused on New Prospect Baptist Church. The new Pastor ~~had to~~~~must~~ possess the common touch so that the members ~~would~~~~will~~ feel comfortable around him. They wanted someone young enough to be appealing, but old enough to be able to govern with prudence and be able to recognize the inherent importance of the wisdom of the church elders. The Church wanted to find someone who was firmly grounded in the community;³ spiritually, emotionally, socially, and occupationally.

On March 15, 2008, Reverend Jerome Roberts was offered and assumed the role of Senior Pastor. Upon taking this position, Pastor Roberts ~~made a request~~~~ed~~ that many members thought unusual: He did not ask to see the church finances, but he asked to see the church history. He began to study the history of New Prospect in the hope of discovering why the Church experienced such turbulent times in its history. New Prospect ~~seems~~~~seem~~ to be a church that was ~~born~~~~birth~~ out of controversy and did not transition well from ~~pastors~~ to ~~pastor~~.⁴ ~~B~~based on the history one could say that most ~~transition~~~~s~~ were venomous.¹

Revered Roberts realized that there were two dynamic and recurring themes in the Church. First, the presence of men in the Church was almost non-existent, which meant there was a gender-imbalance. He noticed that men did not appear in the annals of New Prospect until nearly seventy

¹ “Honoring the Past and Celebrating the Future,” New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church’s One Hundred and Fifth Anniversary (Meridian, Mississippi, 2010).

years after its initial founding. Second, he saw that earlier pastors did not employ the influence of the Church to impact the Meridian community positively. Pastor Roberts believed firmly in Jeremiah 3:15, which states, “And I will give you shepherds according to My heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.”² He believed that the Pastor’s job was not just to preach to the people in the Church, but also to feed the people in the community with knowledge and understanding.

His pastoral leadership philosophy is simple and one that he learned as a youth. If men come to Church, they will bring their families to Church. When families are welcome into the full exposure of leadership within the Church, not only will the Church prosper, but entire families and ~~communities~~ community will thrive. When African-American men and women develop a deep, spiritual connection with God, they adopt a stronger moral standard by which to live, as well as an enriched sense of community. With this spiritual connection with God, they develop a clear understanding of their roles in the family and the community. The result of this enlightenment is that churches, neighborhoods, and communities will be empowered to make a positive impact on this world for Jesus Christ.

Men and women who have the full knowledge of the saving grace of Jesus Christ would not be drawn so much to the Pastor, but to Jesus Christ and The Great Commission. The Great Commission, -as stated in Matthew 28:19-20 is to: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age, Amen.”³ When men and women have the heart of Christ, they will embrace the

² [The New King James Version](#). (1982). (Je 3:15). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

³ [The New King James Version](#) (Matthew 28:19-20) (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

vision that the Pastor has been given to them by God. Embracing the vision is what has begun to transpire at New Prospect during Pastor Roberts's tenure.

In the first three years of Pastor Roberts's tenure, New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church remodeled its educational wing. Now, the practical application of the Word of God is at the center of the Church. He ordained five deacons and one minister, and he relaunched the brotherhood ministry for men that don't have an official position in the Church. With that said, the male population continues to fluctuate in New Prospect as there is no consistency in the number of males attending Church. Some days there are over twenty-five men attending the service; other days there are fewer than fifteen.

Pastor Roberts has discovered that men are mission-minded. If there is a mission or a project they are all in and will participate. However, once the mission is complete, they do not have the same commitment to attending Church.

The History of Meridian, Mississippi

In the minds of many Americans, when someone says Mississippi, it ~~ev~~okes images of a hate-filled society that seeks to keep black people on the lowest rung of the social ladder. Many still believe Mississippi is a place that ~~wants~~want black ~~people to feel~~people feel like second-class citizens and inferior to white people. In the past, the culture of Mississippi said that a black man dare not cross the invisible line of equality. Black people in Mississippi grew up in a society where they understood what white people meant when they said: "stay in your place." Many people view Mississippi as a state that ~~is~~ last in everything, from Education to Health Care.

Mississippi is a society still holding on to some old-South ways; this is evident in the time it took to abolish slavery in the state. As an illustration of holding on to Old-South ways, Mississippi did not vote to officially abolish slavery until 1995, ~~officially~~ and recently the state government officials declared April as Confederate Heritage Month.⁴ When government officials proclaim a month to celebrate a defeated nation, a nation that symbolized racism, oppression, and hatred, this lingering undercurrent indicates that many people in Mississippi want to go back to the “Good Ole Days” when black people were subservient to white people.

Given that Mississippi is a state in the heart of the Bible Belt, on Sunday mornings, most people in Mississippi attend church services. ~~Despite~~ Dispite this, Mississippi’s history suggests that it does not aspire to the commandment found in Leviticus 19:18, which states, “You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”⁵ It continues to hold on to its history, a history that teaches that your neighbor is someone who has the same skin color.

To truly understand the mindset of African-American men in the state of Mississippi and the city of Meridian, it is critical to look at the history of Mississippi during one of the darkest periods in the history of the United States: the Civil Rights Movement. Mississippi was one of the most dangerous and violent places for a black man ~~to~~ live, as he could be killed if he was accused of looking too long at a white woman, walking on the same side of the street as a white person, or talking back to a white person.

⁴ Ladd, Donna. “Mississippi Governor Declares April ‘Confederate Heritage Month,’ No Slavery Mention,” *Jackson Free Press*, 2017, accessed September 12, 2017, <http://www.jacksonfreepress.com/news/2016/feb/24/mississippi-governor-declares-april-confederate-hi/>.

⁵ *The New King James Version* (Leviticus 19:18).

Many people try to hide or romanticize the violent past of Mississippi, but the truth cannot be hidden. In Mississippi, violence directed toward black people and black men in particular after slavery up to the mid-1990s is unprecedented; many black men were the target of hateful, violent and racist attacks such as, i.e. bBeating, hHanging and mMurder. It was only through the grace and protection of Jesus Christ our Lord that more black men were not killed during the period. There are too many martyrs to name, but there are few high profile cases worth mentioning to strengthen this point:

On August 28, 1955, in Money, Mississippi, fourteen-year-old Emmett Louis Till was on vacation. Being from Chicago, he did not understand the stated and unstated rules of Mississippi. For example, a black man could not look at a white woman or walk on the same sidewalk as a white woman. Emmett Till was murdered for allegedly flirting with a white woman. He was pulled out of his grandfather's home and savagely beaten. His attackers tied barbed wire around his neck, put a massive cotton gin fan around him, shot him, and threw his limp and battered body into the river. The men who committed this heinous crime walked into the courtroom with a proud look of confidence on their faces, and it took an all-white, all-male jury one hour to find them not guilty. Emmett Till's mother insisted on an open coffin for the funeral because she wanted the world~~to world~~ to see the horror that her son had endured. The story was featured in the September 15, 1955 issue of *Jet* magazine, which caused shock and anger to reverberate through the African-American community and raised awareness of racism and its consequences.

On June 12, 1963, in Jackson, Mississippi, Medgar Evers was shot in the driveway of his home. He was not a criminal; he was not running from the police and; he was not a drug dealer. Medgar was shot because, as the NAACP's (National Association for the Advancement of Colored

People) director in Mississippi, he was determined to integrate Jackson, the state capital of Mississippi, and those in opposition were willing to go to great lengths to stop him.

This violence has also touched Meridian, Mississippi. James Chaney, a young black man from Meridian, was killed in June 1964. As the story is told, ~~As the story is told~~, three young men, two white and one black, ~~who were~~ were in the forefront of the civil rights movement in Mississippi were taken from their jail cell and ~~brutally~~ ~~brutally~~ murdered in Neshoba County, Mississippi. Their only crime was trying to help the citizens of Mississippi to achieve their constitutional right to equality, allowing every citizen, regardless of race, the right to vote in an election. All of these young men were members of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which had an office in Meridian. Many remember this story from the 1988 film *Mississippi Burning*, but the people of Meridian, Mississippi, experienced the **segregation and degradation every day. CITE**

Mississippi is a state that some would call a “Bible Thumping” state. However, dealing with past sins of racism and inequality, Mississippi has not taken the same stance as that shown in the Bible. Psalm 32:5 states “I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord, And You forgave the iniquity of my sin.”⁶ Mississippi chooses to allow time to heal the wounds of its past instead of facing them head-on. Its passive approach to the sins of the past has allowed the stench of racism and inequality ~~to hovers~~ over the state, and has kept this state at the bottom in education, economic growth, and business opportunities. Against this background, the events such as those mentioned above have contributed to a sense of indifference among many African-American men in this state. The government-

⁶ *The New King James Version* (Psalm 32:5).

sanctioned racism and bigotry in Mississippi throughout the years has negatively impacted the thought processes and psyches of the black male.

For this project to have a significant impact on the role of black males in New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church, a clear understanding of the precise location of the current ministry is critical to appreciate the challenges of this project. The New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church is located on the east side of Meridian, which is commonly known as “The East End.” The East End community is in a poor section of the city that is in rapid decline. Close to New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church are two large housing projects: Highway Village and Reese Court. Near to the Church are several low-income rental houses and various old condemned and abandoned~~abandon~~ houses. To further add to the decline of the community, there is a nightclub named “Holiday’s” or, as it is known in the city, “The Old Folk’s Club.” These night clubs brought down the property values in the community and had a criminal element. On the next block is another unmaintained nightclub that adds to the decline of the community. There is also a rising gang-population with gangs such as the Vice Lords, Crips, and Gangsta Disciples now influencing many young black men in the community.

The East End community of Meridian, Mississippi, was once vibrant and proud, but is now the~~is~~ a shame of the city. It is hard for the black men in the community to grasp the concept of a just, loving, and forgiving God because of the racist history of the state and their current living conditions.

Education and Occupational Data

The above information paints a bleak picture of life in Meridian and Mississippi in general, but in actuality, Meridian is the tale of two cities: the Old South versus the New Progressive Mississippi. The Old South is, composed of those that try to justify the flying of

~~the rebel~~ flag, ~~rebel~~ claiming that it is simply a symbol of their Southern “heritage”, and not a symbol of hate and bigotry. ~~It is made of t~~ Those that ~~want~~wants to go back to the “Good Old Days,” when Black people were murdered and hung for ~~forgetting~~ ~~getting out of~~ their place. The “Good Old Days,” when Black People were seen as less than and subservient to white people. The “Good Old Days,” when Black People were denied the basic rights as a US Citizen. That ~~being~~ ~~having been~~ said, there is ~~-~~the New South group of people. The New South are people that ~~value~~ ~~values~~ diversity and see value in all people, no matter their race, creed, color, or sexual orientation. The New South ~~-that~~ wants to see all races working together to help the city flourish and grow.

Against these two very different ~~attitudes~~ ~~attitudes background~~, lies the City of Meridian, Mississippi, known as the Queen City. Meridian is a small city of ~~-~~about ~~forty~~ ~~fourty~~ thousand residents, and is a reasonable well-educated community. It has a successful community college, Meridian Community College, which has about 3,900 students, ~~a larger~~ ~~larger~~ student body than many four-year colleges and universities. It also has a state-of-the-art workforce development center that is attached to the college. The center prepares students for skilled labor jobs in the future, ~~everything~~ from robotics to welding. In addition, Mississippi State University has a sizable secondary campus in Meridian, offering degrees in several disciplines. In Meridian, one can start school in kindergarten and continue one’s education ~~through~~ to an MBA and never ~~leave~~ ~~leaving~~ the city; very few small towns can boast an education system like the one in Meridian.

According to recent data from the US Census Bureau, as of July 1, 2016, 85.5 percent of people in Meridian have a high school diploma, which is above the 80 percent rate for the rest of the United States. From this same census, 4,449 people had a Bachelor’s degree or higher, which

represents 17.6 percent of the total population. According to town charts, the demographic data of Meridian shows that 61.8 percent of Meridian residents have college degrees counting associate degrees/Two-year degrees.⁷ From ~~the educational~~~~an educational~~ information above, the city of Meridian ~~seems~~~~seem~~ to have embraced the biblical wisdom of Proverbs 16:16, which states: “How much better to get wisdom than gold! To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver.”⁸

The opportunities for education and development are available for all the citizens of Meridian Mississippi. Meridian has positioned itself as the educational hub of East Mississippi and West Alabama. The opportunity to improve people’s lives through education is an indicator of this city’s progressive nature. Even with the educational opportunities, there seems to be a lack of a ~~sense~~ urgency in black families to take advantage of the many opportunities offered in the city. It is imperative that African-American men of God ~~to~~ take the lead in guiding their children so that they may take advantage of the opportunities within their communities. We are taught in Ephesians 6:4, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.”⁹ When the father becomes the spiritual leader of the family, he can influence the lives of his children, both in their spiritual growth and in their career choice; this influence can have a positive impact on the spiritual and economic growth of the church and the African--American community as a whole.

From an educational perspective, the congregation of New Prospect mirrors the city of Meridian. Many of the parishioners have some college degrees, several have associate degrees,

⁷ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/meridiancitymississippi/PST045216>

⁸ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Proverbs 16:16).

⁹ *The Holy Bible: Today’s New International Version* (Ephesians 6:4) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

and most have high school diplomas. Based on the above education data, the congregation of New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church has an opportunity to use this advantage to promote moral, spiritual, and educational growth in their community.

However, the one element that is missing in this equation is the stability of the black male in the church; for far too long the black woman has been the foundation of the African American family, Church, and community. Stable black men in the community and church ~~have~~ has ~~the~~ a potential to enhance and strengthen the educational growth and positively impact their families and the communities.

Occupational Data

Meridian, Mississippi is home to a medium-sized Naval Air Station (NAS Meridian) that employs roughly 230 civilians and military personnel. Along with NAS, Meridian is home to several medium-to-large manufacturing companies such as Lockheed Martin, Tower International, Fairbanks Scales, and Atlas Roofing. The unemployment rate in Meridian as of April 2017 was 4.7 percent, compared to the US average of 4.3 percent.¹⁰

The above data indicates that there is a robust job market in Meridian; however, the data does not tell the entire story. The above unemployment data ~~could be much~~ could be much ~~higher~~ better than the data suggests. The information does not take into account those who are unemployable; many citizens of Meridian can not ~~pass~~ passed background checks or drug screenings. Also, many do not have a fundamental work ethic that should be taught at home, primarily by their mother and father. For example, my father taught me as a youth to dress one

¹⁰ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/meridiancitymississippi/PST045216>

level above the job you want, always be on time for work, always look a person in the eye and give them a firm handshake. In my twenty-plus years of experience as a human resources manager with several large organizations, it is clear that this teaching is lost in our society. The wisdom in Proverbs 22:6 has a universal meaning: “Direct your children onto the right path, and when they are older, they will not leave it.”¹¹

This scripture is not purely spiritual i regards to educating children about God; it also informs parents about how to educate their children in various ways so that their lives will be fruitful. This directing of a child should not just fall on the godly mother, which is the case in many African-American households, but should also be orchestrated by spirit-filled, godly fathers.

Although there are many employment opportunities in Meridian, the 2015 census showed that the median household income for Meridian was \$30,355, which is well below the US national average of, which is \$55,775. At first glance at the median income of Meridian, one could surmise that many residents are close to the poverty line. For a family of four, the poverty line is \$24,300, according to the 2016 federal poverty guidelines. However, this data does not give an accurate picture. For example, the divorce rate in Meridian is at 11.5 percent, and there are 3,048 households with only one parent.¹² The above data changes by inserting a stable Godly man into the picture. For example, take a two-person household where both parents workworkd, and their wage is twelve dollars an hour. If one multiplies that amount by 2,080 hours, which is the yearly average of most workers, the family median income is at \$49,920, which is relatively close to the national average. Having two parents as part of the economic equation of the family provides financial stability and security.

¹¹ *The Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Proverbs 22:6) (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2013).

¹² “Current Meridian, Mississippi Population, Demographics and Stats in 2016, 2017.” SuburbanStats.org, accessed April 19, 2017, <https://suburbanstats.org/population/mississippi/how-many-people-live-in-meridian>.

There is ~~a~~ potential to ~~increase~~~~increased~~ the stability of the family by increased church attendance of men. When men attend church and ~~absorb~~~~absorbs~~ the lessons in the Bible taught regarding the role of the man's ~~responsibility~~~~responsibility~~ in supporting the family financially, they are encouraged to become more responsible for the welfare of their family. For example, the practical lessons taught in 1st Timothy 5:8~~;~~ which state, "But those who won't care for their relatives, especially those in their own household, have denied the true faith. Such people are worse than unbelievers."¹³ If there was an increase in church attendance among black males, principles such as the one mentioned above may result in a more financially stable family structure within the African-American community.

In most cases, the knowledge and instruction black males receive when attending church ~~services~~ ~~goes~~~~services,~~ ~~goes~~ beyond the scripture, songs, and prayers; many lessons learned in Church ~~are~~ ~~critical~~~~is-critical~~ to the success of African-American male in the business world. For example, as a youth, one can learn to tie a tie, how to dress, and how to shine their shoes from the deacons in the Church. I was taught to be proud of their appearance, to look a man in the eye, and to speak clearly, and give him a firm handshake. This foundational teaching is very different from what is seen in today's youth, where one observes sagging pants, shirts never tucked in, a lack of pride in one's appearance, and no direct eye contact made.

This lack of basic pride in one's personal appearance is one of the contributing factors to black male unemployment. As a human resource manager for several Fortune 500 companies, I cannot count the number of African-American males who have come to my office seeking employment but who lacked the basic manners and social skills to influence prospective

¹³ *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (1 Timothy 5:8).

employers. These essential skills are still taught in many African-American churches, but because of a lack of church attendance by black males, they miss more than just the spiritual teaching of the Church; they also miss out on the practical teaching of the Church.

Occupationally, many of the members of the New Prospect Baptist Missionary Church consist of what may be called the working poor. Of course, like many churches, some members have professional jobs and are doing well economically. Many members of the New Prospect church live under the poverty level because single mothers head many of the households. Most mothers are raising their families without any assistance from the father. Once again, the missing element to economically lift the African-American family within Meridian, within the Church, and within the community is the black man sharing in the financial responsibilities of the family.

Racial and Ethnic Makeup

Meridian consists of many races; however, unlike many small towns in Mississippi, African-Americans are in the majority. Notwithstanding, Meridian does not reflect the real racial pride one would think should exist in a city with such a large African-American population. Looking at the demographic makeup of Meridian from an outsider's perspective, one would surmise that the African-American community in Meridian would be thriving. However, this does not seem to be the case. There is political in-fighting, and there is an economic divide within the African-American between the haves and the have-nots. The haves are those well-educated African Americans that have a good stable employment. The have ~~nots~~'s are those African Americans that struggle to make ends meet, that have limited opportunities and little to no formal education or technical training. The racial and ethnic information listed below does not

paint the accurate picture of the city of Meridian as it relates to economic empowerment, political clout, and equality among the races.

Black Population in Meridian

The African-American population in Meridian is estimated to number 25,001; this is estimated at around 61.7 percent of the total population. According to the 2010 US Census, African-Americans make up only 12.6 percent of the American population.

White Population in Meridian

The white population in Meridian numbers 13,697, which is 33.8 percent of the total population of Meridian. White people being the minority is in stark contrast to the white population of the United States, which numbers 72.4 percent, according to the 2010 US census.

The remainder of the population of Meridian consists of Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans. Based on the 2010 census information, one could surmise that Meridian is a diverse city.¹⁴

As previously mentioned, there are approximately 25,001 African-Americans in Meridian. Meridian is one of the few cities of its size in Mississippi that has an African-American mayor, councilman, and police chief. To coincide with this, 76.8 percent of Meridian police officers are African-American. Meridian has African-American doctors and dentists, and the school administrator of one of the largest high schools in the state, Meridian High School, is also African-American¹⁵

¹⁴ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045216/00>

¹⁵ <http://www.city-data.com/city/Meridian-Mississippi.html>

Every major African-American fraternity and sorority has a graduate chapter in Meridian; also, there are clergymen from every denomination as well as many African-American business owners. With such a large number of successful black males and females in this community, Meridian should be a thriving and positive community with a positive outlook on the future of African-American communities.

Nonetheless, the crime rate in Meridian as of 2015 is 304 per 100,000, compared to the US average of 207.7. Sadly, a large percentage of crimes in the city are committed by young black males-between aged fourteen and above. Also, the four-year graduation rate from high school for Meridian is at 72.9 percent, compared to the national average of 83.2 percent.¹⁶ In Meridian, it is not the quality of education that is the primary concern. The major concern is keeping African-American children and parents engaged in the educational process through High School Graduation.¹⁷

The question remains that, with all the positive, black male influences, why has this influence not equated to less crime, higher graduation rates, and a stable and thriving African-American community? The issue is not about power, but spirituality. There must be a renewing of the mind; the African American mind must be free from the low expectations, prejudice, and inferiority complex of the past, to effect positive change in the African-American community in Meridian.

The spiritual truth is taught in Romans 12:2, which states, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what the

¹⁶ <http://www.city-data.com/crime/crime-Meridian-Mississippi.html>

¹⁷ www.governing.com/gov.../state-high-school-graduation-rates-by-race-ethnicity.html

will of God is, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”¹⁸ Lasting, impactful, and sustained change occurs when we have a clear understanding of God’s will for our lives. Authentic and impactful change starts with the mind. The Bible teaches in Ephesians 4:22-24 to “Throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life, which is corrupted by lust and deception. Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes.”¹⁹ When the mind is transformed and renewed, when men are taught to embrace the Word of God, follow the Biblical~~ly~~ teaching ~~and~~; they plant and cultivate God’s Word into their families, then real, sustained change ~~can takeean~~ ~~change take~~ hold in the African American Community and Church.

Religious Affiliation and Attendance

Based on the above narrative, one may ask the question “Where is the Church and what is the role of the Church in community and race relations?” In the South, there is no shortage of churches. From large cathedrals that hold thousands of people to storefront churches that hold only a few, there is a church on every corner, and many are of the Baptist denomination. In Meridian, the Baptist ~~den~~omination covers about 90 percent of the churches, many of which are within the black community.

The Church has a strong influence on the culture and mindset of Mississippi’s citizens; the Church influences everything from clothing styles to who is elected to political office. For example, due to the power of the various churches in the state, Mississippi was the first state to enact prohibition in the form of the Volstead Act, on January 8, 1918, and one of the last states to repeal it.

¹⁸ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Romans 12:2).

¹⁹ *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Ephesians 4:22-24).

This far-reaching influence of the Church can be both positive and negative, particularly if churches band together in a Convention model of many churches coming together under one umbrella. Many white churches under some Conventions have had a negative influence and impact on race relations between White Christians and Black Christians. For instance, the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest in the state, with approximately 708,754 members, has not always used their influence to influence positive race relations. In 1934, the Southern Baptist Convention's president refused to sit at a public dinner because a black person was sitting at the same dinner; this racist action set the tone among white Baptists that black people were inferior. It also led many African-Americans to hold a negative view of the Southern Baptist Convention. Unfortunately, these old attitudes about African Americans in some Southern states still persist.

Many negative ~~perceptions attributed to~~attitudes about African Americans, such as inferior, unintelligent, and lazy, still exist primarily because of the incorrect preaching and teachings of the Southern Baptist pulpit, the press, and general conventions. Southern Baptists supported the ideology that black people were inherently inferior, under the belief of the "Curse of Ham." The curse of Ham has been used to justify the oppression of African people and their descendants because Ham has been called the father of African people. The justification of this preposterous notion is taken from Genesis 9:18, which has been wrongly interpreted by many "so-called," biblical scholars, to condone slavery, segregation, and bigotry ~~of~~against African Americans.

This was a blatant lie, as there is no "Curse of Ham" in the Bible. The scripture clearly states in Genesis 9:24-25: "So Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his younger son had done to him. -Then he said: 'Cursed *be* Canaan; A servant of servants He shall be to his

brethren.”²⁰ This curse was never directed at Ham, but at Noah’s grandson, Canaan. This warped theology somehow convinced many white people in Mississippi and in the South that slavery was a blessing in disguise because it introduced Africans to Christ.

Many Southern Baptists Convention accepted the philosophy that black people were cursed and that segregation was an acceptable form of race relations. Although there were some attempts of evangelism in the African-American communities by the Southern Baptist Convention, most turned a blind eye to the lynching and beating that took place. The Southern Baptists were not the bold prophets that we see in the Bible; instead of speaking out on these injustices, they bowed down to racism, segregation, and prejudice, as failure to speak up is a clear sign of acceptance. Dr. Martin Luther King said it best:²¹ “It may well be that we will have to repent in this generation. Not merely for the vitriolic words and the violent actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say, “Wait on time.”

This acceptance of racism, segregation, and injustice surfaced in February 1956, almost two years after the US Supreme Court’s *Brown vs. the Board of Education* ruling, which declared segregation as unconstitutional. Wallie Amos Criswell, a very popular pastor who was Pastor of one of the largest churches in the Southern Baptist Convention, was a keynote speaker at the South Carolina Baptist Convention Evangelism Conference. As he spoke to the attending ministers with passion and fervor, his sermon took a sinister turn as he began to denounce the *Brown* ruling and hatefully and unapologetically encouraged other ministers to do the same.²¹

²⁰ *The New King James Version* (Genesis 9:24-25).

²¹ McBeth, Leon, “Southern Baptists and race since 1947,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 7, no. 3 (July 1972): 155-169. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed April 28, 2017).

In the audience was the Governor of South Carolina, George Timmerman; he agreed with the denunciation of the Brown²s decision and the hateful rhetoric of Criswell so much, that he invited him to speak at the South Carolina legislature. Criswell accepted the invitation and once again emphatically unleashed his opposition to the Civil Rights Movement, the high court, and other Americans who supported the end of the Jim Crow Laws. Criswell, a pastor who was supposed to be a man of God, thundered: “Let them sit up there in their dirty shirts and make all their fine speeches. However, they are all a bunch of infidels, dying from the neck up!”

Criswell was not the only preacher in the Southern Baptist Convention to accept and promote this notion of white supremacy. Carey Daniel, minister of the First Baptist Church of West Dallas, Texas, preached a sermon entitled “God: The Original Segregator.” His sermon is based on the incorrect theology of Ham, in Genesis 10:32: “These are the families of the sons of Noah ... in their nations: and by these were the nations divided in the earth after the flood.” He incorrectly understood the biblical word “nations” to mean “race.”²² His erroneous theological propaganda, claiming that black people are inferior to white people, perpetrated by one of the largest Christian conventions in the nation, has stifled both church growth and church attendance in the African-American community. Because of the many years of this erroneous theological propaganda of a “White God,” many in the African-American community ask the question, “Why-~~to~~ serve a God that has made one race inferior to another?”

The above example of historic and blatant racism is the type of problem that the twenty-first-century-African-American pastors must confront. How can one teach ~~thesethis~~ parishioners

²² Manis, Andrew M. “Dying From the Neck Up’: Southern Baptist Resistance to the Civil Rights Movement,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 34, no. 1 (1999): 33-48. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost, accessed April 28, 2017.

to love their neighbor, when there is historic evidence that their neighbor hates the color of their skin?

Many African American pastors ~~attempt to answer~~ attempt answer the question regarding God's race by quoting John 4:24, which states "God *is* Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."²³ Although most African- Americans in Meridian Mississippi are of the Baptist denomination, there are still some lingering historical and racial issues that cause many to mistrust of the Southern Baptist Convention. This mistrust has driven a divide between those who are associated with the Baptist Denomination, and has had a negative impact on church attendance in many African American Baptist Churches.

The Sense of Community

In a journal of religious thought, there is an article titled, "African-American Pastoral Psychology in the Twenty-First Century Will Be More Than Sensual Healing," by Lee Hayward Butler Jr. This article best describes the sense of community in Meridian. Like many communities, on the surface, the town of Meridian appears to have a deep sense of togetherness. Citizens rally around their champion football and basketball teams, but once the games are over, the crowds disperse, and everyone goes back to their segregated neighborhoods, churches, and lives.

While the evils of gangs and crack houses radically diminish the quality of life in African-American communities, the people in these communities put on a brave face. While their neighborhood is being traumatized, the overwhelming sentiment in the Meridian

²³ *The New King James Version*(John 4:24).

community at large believe that this is an East End problem. How can there be a sense of community when the east end of the city is plagued by the tridimensional oppression of racism, sexism, and classism, and when violence has become the primary mode of operation?

There can be no sense of community when there is a severe deficiency in Spirit-filled, godly men to lead and guide the community. As previously mentioned, the absence of godly men in the black community has given rise to the imprisonment of young black men and the increase of single-family households, headed by young black women. There can be no sense of community when there has been a deterioration of core value systems such as hard work, family, education, and pride. These values have traditionally sustained the African-American community and culture, and ~~were~~ typically taught in Church. The black community must take to heart the Biblical teaching in Galatians 6:2 “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”²⁴

African-American men and women struggle socially, politically and economically for dignity and for their lives to matter in the land of milk and honey, the land of plenty, the United States of America; but we have somehow abandoned the ideological foundations of unity, hope and love for one another within the African-American community. This sense of unity was cultivated and nurtured by the Church; the strong foundations of the first African-American communities were centered on the Church, and spirit-filled godly men and women held fast to the African Proverb that it takes a village to raise a child. The strength and survival of African-American communities, however, was not built on rugged individualism but upon the ethics of

²⁴ *The New King James Version*(Galatians 6:2).

communitarianism. The belief that the community that struggles together will be uplifted together was grounded in ~~the~~ spirituality and trust in God as a protector of the downtrodden.²⁵

With that said, Meridian is striving to become one community, through programs like the Interdenominational ~~-~~ Ministerial Alliances, which brings clergy from all races and ~~denominations~~ ~~denomination~~ together to pray for the city of Meridian and its citizens. Through prayer, Meridian will see the one community idea come to fruition. For Meridian Mississippi to indeed be a community of one, the spiritual power of God within us all must be allowed to change our minds and our hearts about other races. All races must make a conscious decision to celebrate their differences with honest and open communication. By the loving power of Jesus Christ, this is when the healing process will begin, which will result in a community of oneness.

Political Alignment

The political alignment in Mississippi has been one of its primary issues. The political process was designed as a way to keep African-Americans in Mississippi as second-class citizens through fear and intimidation. For many years, African-Americans did not have the right to vote for their public officials. This intimidation created a one-party state, which was dominated by the white Democrats.

The state of Mississippi ~~has been divided~~ ~~has divided~~ into two political parties: the Democratic Party is predominately African-American, while the Republican Party is predominately white. African-Americans voters in Mississippi have been disenfranchised since August 6, 1965, due to the signing of the Voting Rights Act. The signing of the Voting Rights Act, by President Lyndon Johnson, did not erase the physical, emotional and economic violence

²⁵ Butler, Lee H. Jr. 1997. "African-American Pastoral Psychology in the Twenty-First Century Will Be More Than Sensual Healing," *The Journal of Religious Thought* 53-54, no. 2-1: 113-130. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost, accessed May 4, 2017.

that African Americans experienced. The State of Mississippi ~~has~~ gone to great ~~lengths~~ links to ~~deny~~ denied African Americans the opportunity to take part in the elections, even after the Voting Act of 1965 ~~was~~ had passed.

Today, many African-American males still cannot vote because they have a felony on their record. In Mississippi, African Americans make up 37 percent of the general population, but 61.4 percent of the prison population, meaning ~~a lot~~ more black people ~~are~~ incarcerated than white people (3.5 times to be more exact). Besides, Mississippi has one of the harshest laws in the nation that restricts or, in many cases, denies a person with a felony the right to vote. This law ~~disproportionately~~ ~~disproportionally~~ impacts African-American males.. The 1972 Code § 23-5-35 states:

“Any person who has been convicted of any crime listed in Section 241, Mississippi Constitution of 1890, shall not be registered, or if registered the name of such person ~~shall~~ be erased from the registration book on which it may be found by the registrar or by ~~the~~ election commissioners. Whenever any person shall be convicted in the circuit court ~~of~~ his county of any of said crimes, the registrar shall thereupon erase his name from the registration book; and whenever any person shall be convicted of any of said crimes in ~~any~~ other court of any county, the presiding judge thereof shall, on demand, certify the ~~fact~~ in writing to the registrar, who shall thereupon erase the name of such person from ~~the~~ registration book and file said certificate as a record of his office.”²⁶

This code is designed to keep one party in power; however, the State of Mississippi does not solely ~~bear~~ bare the blame for the state of African American lack of voting, there is also a sense of apathy in the black community in relation to exercising their right to vote. Many

²⁶ <http://felonvoting.procon.org/view.resource.php?resourceID=000286>

African-Americans born after 1980 are far removed from the violent struggles that took place ~~that~~ gave black people the right to vote without fear and intimidation. Many are not aware of the power of the vote to change their condition; in fact, many see it as a waste of their time, as if their vote ~~doesn't~~~~does not~~ count.

As a pastor, I rarely invite politicians to speak at morning worship services or have political statements during church services. Be that as it may, one particular Sunday during the church announcements, one of the elderly mothers in the Church asked to make an announcement. Her daughter helped her up from her seat, and she turned to the congregation with tears streaming down her face. Her voice trembled and cracked, and her hand trembled as she pointed at the congregation. She said, "Please, please vote. Too many people have died. Do not let their lives be in vain. Please vote." With this, she waved her hand toward heaven and then took her seat. This plea sent a powerful message to the younger members of the congregation; they experienced the raw emotions of someone who had once been denied the right to vote.

A contributing factor to the apathy surrounding voting today in the African-American community is the lack of church attendance. The Church used to be the center of every social and political movement in the black community. The Champion of the Civil Rights Movement was a Baptist preacher, Martin Luther King Jr. Churches are where most of the Civil Rights Movement meetings took place. There is no way to disconnect the Church from the social and political climate of our time. Mississippi will continue to be a state that is a two-party system which runs along racial lines unless men and women of the Christian faith come together, put aside their differences, and work for the greater good of all the communities in the state.

In conclusion, the ministry project is for New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church, 1939 9th Avenue Meridian, Mississippi. The researcher is determined to establish a ministry where

men will be included and free to praise and worship God. As previously mentioned, the Church is located in a declining neighborhood where unemployment is over 10 percent among African-American men; there are still wooded and unkempt lots, as well as abandoned and run-down houses. Most members of New Prospect commute to the Church and would not otherwise be in the neighborhood if not for the power of Jesus Christ and the great commission found in Matthew 28:16-20, which states: Jesus came and told his disciples, “ I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. Moreover, be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Thus, the primary objective of New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church is to make disciples for Jesus Christ, and if one can lead men to Christ, those men will, in turn, influence their families and community to turn to Christ.

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