

Working While It's Day: Economic Development and the Black Church Influence

Jordan McKenzie

08/30/2023

Report Submitted to Dr. Kolzow

Introduction

The history of the Black Church in the United States is a testament to its enduring significance as a source of spiritual strength, social cohesion, and economic empowerment within African-American communities. From its origins during slavery to its pivotal role in the Civil Rights Movement and beyond, the Black Church has played a multifaceted role in shaping the economic trajectory of African Americans in the country. In West Tennessee specifically, it has emerged as a vital institution contributing to economic development within the African-American community. Despite the tremendous internal efforts of the ethnic entity, the economic development programs for minority communities from the public realm have been lackluster at best within Tennessee. Specifically, workforce development efforts for Black Americans here can primarily connect to the lack of connection between state legislation and the community itself. One prominent solution to fix this issue is involving the African-American church, a cornerstone of Black-American culture and history, in activities and programs to help recruit and create a workforce-ready population in this minority community.

Through first-hand accounts and interviews, an abridged review of existing programs, and an overview of market trends and socio-economic factors, this capstone will not only seek to promote an understanding of the gap in workforce readiness in the Black community but also why the Black Church is the most significant catalyst in Tennessee that can change that narrative. The major points to be covered include the potency of the Black Church in mobilizing its parishioners in TN, the current workforce efforts underway and their results, and what's next economically for the Black Church and its people. If the Black Church and the State of Tennessee can collaboratively lift the workforce readiness burden, then this will be a clarion call

to the rest of the country that economic development, spirituality, and diversity can effectively thrive together.

Demographic Background

Before we can dissect the role of the Black Church, we must first examine the Black Community in Tennessee. As of the 2020 United States Census, the population of Tennessee is approximately 6.9 million. Of this total population, African Americans or Black individuals constituted around 17.1%. Educational attainment varies within the African-American population in Tennessee. As of 2020, approximately 19% of African Americans over 25 held a bachelor's degree or higher. Efforts to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for African-American students have been ongoing. According to Nathan Hoffman and Kayla Ward with ExcellInEd, 233,000 black students enrolled in public schools, only 21% of students are hitting proficient levels in reading according to TN statewide assessments. In Math, only 9.6% are hitting professional levels of math.

According to data from the United States Census Bureau's American Community Survey for 2019, the median household income in Tennessee for African-American households was approximately \$39,131. In comparison, the median household income for all racial and ethnic groups in Tennessee was about \$54,522. According to the Sycamore Institute, roughly 22% of African Americans in the state live below the poverty line. The child poverty rate is soaring in the state with more African American populations, with counties like Shelby, Madison, and Davidson coming in between 22-26.7%. Tennessee's homeowner rate is 67%, but in the African-American community, that number declines to 44%.

Workforce readiness is a huge component of overall economic development, and in the Black Community, there's a story there as well. According to July 2022 Tennessee Labor Market Report, Black African Americans were mostly employed in the education and health services sector (21.2 percent), followed by transportation and utilities (15.2 percent). Professional services is the chosen industry for 18% of the 486,000 employable African-American adults by occupation group. The unemployment rate among the black community is 7.1%, which is higher than the state average of 4.1%. The unemployment rate for black men is 6.1%, and 7.9% for black women. The statistics point towards a dire workforce perspective for the Black Community. The situation, however, dually presents an opportunity for the workforce readiness effort in TN to hit a new stage in programming: Partnership with the Church.

African American religious affiliation holds strong and church attendance is still solid. According to Pew Research Center data from 2021, 75% of the African Americans are said that they were Christians. Of that 75%, 83% said that they attend a church that could be categorized as a black church – meaning both the clergy and most of the congregation was black. Additionally, 23% of church attendees testified that they go to historically black denominations such as the National Baptist Convention, African Methodist Episcopal, and Church of God In Christ. These numbers indicate a strong attendance of black churches from the black community even in the 21st century. Consequently, these numbers also suggest that there's an untapped workforce that exists outside of secular recruitment parameters.

Historic Overview of the Black Church

Historians can trace the roots of the Black Church back to the early days of slavery when enslaved Africans found solace and community in religious gatherings. Despite facing harsh restrictions and suppression of their spiritual practices, African Americans managed to cultivate

their unique expressions of Christianity. These early gatherings laid the foundation for the Black Church's subsequent growth and resilience.

Following emancipation, the Black Church emerged as a center for spiritual guidance and economic empowerment. A prominent figure in the late 19th and early 20th century who led the economic charge was Booker T. Washington, an author, educator, and Christian philosopher. Washington believed that education should encompass vocational and practical skills and moral and spiritual values. He saw the church as a central institution in the African-American community, providing spiritual guidance and a sense of community and support. Washington believed practical vocational education and skills training were essential for African Americans to improve their economic status. He emphasized the importance of learning trades and skills that would enable individuals to secure employment and become economically self-reliant. He founded the Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University) in Alabama, which focused on providing vocational and agricultural education to African-American students. Recognizing the importance of economic self-sufficiency, many Black churches established benevolent societies, mutual aid organizations, and credit unions to support their congregants financially. These efforts aimed to mitigate the financial challenges newly freed African Americans faced.

The Black Church also played a pivotal role in promoting education and entrepreneurship. Recognizing the value of education as a tool for economic advancement, churches established schools and promoted literacy within their communities. Moreover, many church leaders encouraged entrepreneurship by providing resources, mentorship, and networking opportunities for aspiring Black business owners.

The Black Church emerged as a hub of activism and economic advocacy during the Civil Rights Movement. The Montgomery Bus Boycott, sparked by Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her

bus seat to a white passenger, marked a turning point in the fight against racial segregation. African Americans, led by figures like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., organized a massive boycott of the city's bus system, lasting 381 days. This collective action had economic repercussions that challenged the status quo and highlighted the power of the African-American community. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. saw economic justice as an integral part of the broader struggle for civil rights. In Tennessee, church leaders like Reverend Benjamin Hooks, who later became a prominent civil rights leader, used the pulpit as a platform for economic empowerment discussions. Consider the Church of God In Christ, the most prominent African-American Pentecostal Church in the world with over 6 million members worldwide, as they recently hosted Workforce development workshops with Waste Management in Memphis, TN, and also completed 20+ units of affordable housing in the heart of Downtown Memphis, TN. The church's involvement in advocating for fair wages, equal employment opportunities, and an end to economic discrimination underscored its commitment to holistic empowerment.

Economic Development Concepts and Definitions

Economic development is a system of programs, policies, and activities that create economic well-being and quality of life for communities. The Tennessee Certified Economic Development Program structures the core tenets of Economic Development around Business Retention and Expansion, entrepreneurship, workforce development, and business recruitment. This project primarily focuses on the workforce development gap and the skills deficit in the African-American Community that can be rectified through collaboration with Christian institutions. Other sub-area economic development delves involve job creation, global competitiveness, innovation and technology, sustainable development, and storytelling. For workforce development, the critical bill is the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act from

2014. This bill consolidated many of the programs under WIA 1998, and it mandated that states coordinate their workforce programs with job seekers and employers to create a strategic workforce plan that's updated every four years or so.

Operation: Working While It's Day

The capstone project focuses on exposing the opportunity the state of Tennessee has to partner with the Black Church and highlight the positive impact it would have on the minority community. This project's title, "Working While It's Day," comes from the biblical principle of doing good work while you have available time. In that same consciousness, the state must create meaningful connections with its diverse populations while that window of opportunity remains. This research project involved a few stakeholders to address the status quo change the Black church can bring and possible ways to involve faith-based organizations like the Black Church in creating an economic impact within minority communities in TN. The main obstacle that was considered was tackling old mindsets, traditional ways of thinking, and, more importantly, believing. Another crucial obstacle would be scheduling time for the right people to meet and provide their feedback. The project's primary information came from three virtual interviews with three different individuals that helped shed light on this topic and its complexities, and the feedback was very enlightening.

The first virtual interview was with Pastor John Smith. Professionally, Pastor John Smith has been in project management and community engagement for 15+ years. He was the chairman of the Shelby County Housing Authority from 2010-2012 and was a commissioner for the Shelby County Community Redevelopment Agency from 2012-2016. He also serves as the Pastor of Rosemark Church in Millington and the Executive Director for Community Builders – a non-profit organization focused on the church. His church is in the process of several projects that

range from School Partnership and community gardening to senior living housing. One project in particular that should interest local and state governance is the Life Center. Although this life center will have a myriad of uses, it will also provide office space to small businesses in the area that cannot afford commercial rental units. That's right. This provision of office space can be directed as a launch for business incubation and serve as a place for coffee clutches and we-work opportunities for suburban and rural workers.

In the interview, when asked about what role the church plays in economic development and advancement for the black community, he said, "The church sits right in the middle of the political, economic, and social development of the community because it is one of the few places that lower middle and upper-class African Americans can come together and feel the same." It's from this thought that he continues and says, "As a leader, it important that we have hubs and think tanks to galvanize the exchange of ideas and knowledge of talent so that we can build our influence on decisions made concerning our people and communities." The interview continued and there was a discussion of how the Black Church served as workforce development unofficially. He spoke and said "the grassroots effort of small and rural churches is pivotal to our community as well. What is a parking lot and greeter ministry? That's customer service skills. What are trustee board members and clergy staff? That's project management. What are easter speeches and drama plays? That public speaking and communication skill building." He also speaks on the youth learning media tools and programs that help them have in-demand skills that other companies and organizations seek in the 21st century. That realization alone exposes a glaring opportunity diversification that companies have missed because the workforce was built in an unconventional place.

The second interview was conducted with Pastor Mario Hayslett. Professionally, Pastor Hayslett created a 22-year career path in the education sector as a computer lab instructor, classroom facilitator, and interventionalist, to name a few roles. Pastor Hayslett has been working with the Tipton County Workforce Program as a college access coach for the past nine years. For the past 4-5 years, he's been coordinating an initiative that gives the county early access to high schoolers as soon as 10th grade to prep them with quality skills needed in the workforce for local and regional businesses. He also serves as the Pastor of Spiller Hill Church in Ripley, TN, and has been empowering those parishioners for the last few years. In his introduction, he explicitly says, "I find myself bridging agencies and groups of people around the idea of empowerment. And you can't find an escape from economic development and stability when dealing with empowerment. I find joy and passion in ensuring our people have the resources to meet the workforce needs [in the community]."

The conversation within the interview turned towards interconnectivity. There was a discussion of how marrying spirituality and economic development is crucial in molding African-Americans into better and more productive citizens of society. For Pastor Hayslett, compelling spirituality has no choice but to lead to better employability. The next point of the interview addressed workforce development in the church directly. Pastor Hayslett: "I don't believe the black church fully understood that it was preparing us for the workforce. Because historically African Americans were rarely allowed to showcase themselves in their best light in corporate America." He went on to make the point that the black church currently is in a junction that can now require more pointed efforts in partnering with public agencies to spur economic impact. "I don't believe we (the black church) our emphasis on economic development as much as we never pulled into a full realization on a more necessary and broader scale."

The next question posed to Pastor Hayslett was about the black church and leadership involvement within the public spaces. "People value what you communicate," Pastor Hayslett says. "So if you want your people to get involved in their civic duties, that must be communicated to the audience consistently." He talks about a housing dispute between a landlord and tenants in the city, and it turns out that many of the tenants involved in the conflict were members of his church. Consequently, he unofficially became the spokesperson on behalf of the people. His point in sharing that story was that if economic development is going to be cherished by the black community, it must start with the leadership of the black church. Pastor Hayslett leaves a departing thought of ensuring one creates a solid knowledge base of the community that they serve so that workforce development efforts match the demographic potential of the area. The black church in Tennessee has a massive workforce pool at its disposal. Although the action by the state may seem weak, the fact remains that the black church remains vigilant in cultivating the skills that businesses seek to utilize.

Lastly, the following interview was with an individual who also completed the TCED program and so happened to serve as the mentor for this capstone project: Mayor Julian McTizic Sr. The mayor was both the first African American and the youngest elected mayor in the city of Bolivar. The mayor sits on several boards, including but not limited to the Local Government Advisory Committee, Small Community Advisory Subcommittee, Bolivar General Hospital Foundation, and the NAACP. Lastly, the mayor is the CEO of Legacy Financial Group and is a National Association of Insurers and Financial Advisors member.

The interview started with dissecting the intrinsic importance of the black church in creating workforce readiness. The mayor sets the understanding that even though it may not be called "workforce development," the church was the place within the black community where

one built the necessary skills for corporate America. "We must get the [black] church to be intentional on how we transition the people that have developed these soft skills to use them in the day-to-day workforce ."Mayor McTizic discussed that the necessary skillsets are being built, and it's incumbent upon the nation and, more specifically, the state to recognize this fact and use it as a strong reason for developing relationships with faith-based organizations.

The dialogue shifted to discussing some specific needs the city of Bolivar has regarding Economic Development and the assistance the black church could provide. "Housing," the mayor stated, "We very easily could have several churches sitting on several acres of land, and that land could be developed into the housing that we need in the city and county." "If I can get the small churches to come together, they can compete for agency dollars across the state, which leads to other economic development incentives like New Market Tax credits and Opportunity Zones. The church could be accessing those funds in the same way".

The last question was about bridging the understanding gap between the government needing a diverse workforce and the Black Church providing such. The mayor says, "Communication. The government has to come outside of the walls of city hall and the state capitol. Maybe less than 5% of the population even understands the terminology we're using in this interview... how we get from where the need is to where the funding is – that's where we have to bridge that gap of communication. We have the entities in place." He continued his thought by saying, "We have to figure out how to have more of these conversations, and we can make these opportunities work for everyone."

Project Results, Reflections, and Extended Scope

After conducting the interviews, it's reasonable to believe that there's an untapped workforce that's ready to be exhumed and placed into the economy on a local and global scale. The interviews each confirmed in their unique ways that the church has the power to provide economic stability to its neighborhoods in Tennessee and should be fully used by public agencies to provide higher-quality services to the community. This project served as a foundational exposé of how the black church was and can continue to be a catalyst for a massive workforce program to be launched into the Black Community here in Tennessee. A strategic workforce plan should be formulated and implemented to combat help bridge this gap. The strategic stakeholders within this initiative are the churches themselves, the companies that supply the jobs, and the public agencies that benefit from a mutual relationship between the two.

Tennessee should use the Black Church to create economic vitality in the community, with the first key objective to create open dialogue among Black Clergy and Public Officials around workforce development. The second key objective should be to facilitate partnerships with public schools and TCAT to host training seminars on actual church grounds and involve the Black Church in workforce grants applicable to TN. The timeframe to implement and craft this plan would involve several policyholder meetings. Formulating would take at least a year, but the programs could be implemented immediately upon creating the strategic plan. A 3-month, 6-month, 1-year evaluation system should be in place to ensure the key performance indicators are being met.

Conclusion

It is important to re-emphasize that this capstone brings light on how much of a role the African-American Church can play when galvanizing people into the working world. With a workforce-ready population, marketing and attraction become more manageable for the state and cities while providing minority communities an opportunity for societal advancement. This report recommends that a steering committee be put in place in municipalities and by the state to discuss how funding can be allocated to implementing the strategic plan and help create programs directly in the minority populous across the state.

References

- 2021 Health Disparities Report* . (n.d.). Retrieved from America's Health Rankings:
<https://www.americashealthrankings.org/learn/reports/2021-disparities-report/state-summaries-tennessee>
- Faith Among Black Americans* . (2021, February 16). Retrieved from Pew Research Center:
<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/02/16/religious-affiliation-and-congregations/>
- Hayslett, M. (2023, August 2). The Black Church and Economic Development. (J. McKenzie, Interviewer)
- July 2022 Tennessee Labor Market Report*. (n.d.). Retrieved from Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development :
<https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/workforce/documents/LMR/LMRJuly2022.pdf>
- Mari, B. (2018, May 17). *The Black Church: The Key to Black Economic Empowerment*. Retrieved from Medium: <https://medium.com/@iloveblackpeopleapp/the-black-church-key-to-black-economic-empowerment-64bccca499b8>
- McTizic, M. J. (2023, August 10). The Black Church and Economic Development. (J. McKenzie, Interviewer)
- Smith, J. (2023, August 1). The Black Church and Economic Development . (J. McKenzie, Interviewer)
- Spears, M. (2022, December 9). *2021 Census Data on Income & Poverty in Tennessee*. Retrieved from The Sycamore Institute: <https://www.sycamoreinstituten.org/2021-income-poverty-in-tennessee/>
- Tennessee*. (2023). Retrieved from Black Demographics :
<https://blackdemographics.com/states/tennessee/>
- TN Economic and Workforce Analysis 2022-2023*. (n.d.). Retrieved from Jobs4TN:
<https://www.jobs4tn.gov/admin/gsipub/htmlarea/uploads/LMI/Publications/TN%20Economic%20&%20Workforce%20Analysis%20-%20PY%202022-2023.pdf>
- What is the state of Black education in Tennessee?* (2021, November 12). Retrieved from ExcellnEd:
<https://excelined.org/2021/11/12/askexcelined-what-is-the-state-of-black-education-in-tennessee/#:~:text=In%20reading%2C%20for%20example%2C%2021,the%202019%20TNReady%20statewide%20assessment.>
- Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act* . (n.d.). Retrieved from Department of Labor:
<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/wioa>