

Speaker 1:

Welcome to the Vanderbloemen Leadership Podcast. February is Black History Month, and to continue learning about the establishment, evolution and culture of the Black Church, we spoke with African-American Christian leaders to guide us through the history of the Black Church and the critical purpose it serves as part of the full Kingdom. These conversations cover some of the critical events in early U.S. history, all the way up to current events in an effort to help us appreciate the roots and development of the Black Church. In today's conversation, our Director of Special Initiatives & Operations and Executive Search Consultant, Chantel McHenry, spoke with Kermit Moss, Pastor of Christ Church UMC in Patterson, New Jersey, and a PhD candidate in the area of practical theology at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Speaker 1:

They cover the significant impacts that the Civil Rights era had on the Black Church and how the church responded to this critical period in history. Pastor Moss shares how the Black Church shaped the spiritual formation and experience of African-American communities in the 1960s. And he draws insightful comparisons to the events from the Civil Rights era to what's happening in our country today. At Vanderbloemen, we value constant improvement and we invite you to walk alongside us as we learn more about how to better love and serve the whole church. We hope you enjoy Chantel's conversation with Pastor Kermit Moss.

Chantel McHenry:

All right. Well, Pastor Moss, thank you so much for joining us today on the Vanderbloemen Leadership Podcast. You're actually a part of the series that we're doing on the history and evolution of the Black Church. So, great to have you and to get your perspective. You and I are going to sort of talk about that period of time from let's say, Martin Luther King era where right around his death, and as the riots were coming up in the '60s and then kind of come on into 2021 where we are today, where we're actually seeing some of the same things, similar things that we saw back in the '60s. So, that's going to be our timeframe that we discuss today, so glad to have you on the podcast. Could you just share a little bit with our listening audience, tell them about who you are, what you're currently doing professionally, academically, whatever you'd like to share.

Kermit Moss:

Well, first of all I want to say thank you, and thank you for the opportunity to share and be part of this podcast. I really appreciate it. So, just a little background on me. First, my name is Kermit Moss, pastor of a church, United Methodist Church in Patterson, New Jersey. It's a diaspora church, which means individuals who are of African descent whether they are from the Caribbean, whether they from West Africa or from different parts of the United States and were born here. So, it's a very, very interesting church.

Kermit Moss:

In addition, I'm the Interim Director for the Center for Black Church studies at Princeton Theological Seminary. So, in that role, I help develop the programming for the seminary, the center, its events. I teach the colloquium every second semester of every year related to all things of Black Church. In addition, there are a lot of in addition, so I wear lots of hats. All right?

Chantel McHenry:

That's good.

Kermit Moss:

In addition, I'm also a PhD student at Princeton Seminary, where I went for my MD and I'm writing my dissertation. So, I'm ABD and I'm in practical theology with a focus in education and formation. And so, my chief research at this juncture is around these categories, related to youth formation and spiritual formation and education, educational pedagogies within the church, areas of spirituality, culture, intersection of culture and theology and black youth. I have a number of research interest. And then in addition, just, it would be interesting, I did six month for missions in the Philippines and I've pastored in churches across denomination. So, I've pastored in not only United Methodist churches, Bible Church for five years. I pastored in Church of God Church and in a large mega Baptist Black Church. And so, I've been on senior roles for a long time and then even on staff.

Kermit Moss:

So, I think I have some things to share that can be across culture, capacity cross-cultural churches, mostly Latino churches, Black Churches, and even in churches where individuals have different theological perspectives and different political lens. So, in churches where individuals might be in same church, which is interesting. So, individuals might be, I would say, a Pan-African or I'll just say a black radical traditions in the same church with individuals who are Trump supporters. And what's interesting is they all get along. And so, I think I have something to share I hope, and something that I can learn from others on the other podcast as well. So, I thank you for the opportunity.

Chantel McHenry:

Thank you. I appreciate that. And that's an interesting perspective, right? When you've got a body of believers that you're leading and pastoring, shepherding, and politically, they kind of end up on two sides of the spectrum, which is not common, I would say in churches. So, definitely navigating that in a place of unity and still having peace in community within that body is fantastic. I mean, that's great to be able to lead in that way. So, let's kick off by talking about just the Black Church and civil rights movement in the 60s, kind of share with us what was going on. What was the role of the Black Church, things of that nature?

Kermit Moss:

So, the 60s work, I would say, were I would call it a crescendo era. A crescendo is a doorway era, right? So, you have technology, you have these, I would say, changes in politics and in some measures also a turbulent era, right? There is stability in some measure within black communities, because those communities, particularly in the South, those communities were not segregated. And so, you had a sense of continuity in some measure and church was at the center of those communities. It was at the center of those communities, not only as a safe haven, but a space of formation, a space of worship, a space of education, a space of fellowship, a space of development of young people, not only in terms of spiritual formation, but their human formation.

Kermit Moss:

And there was a space of affirmation, part of it because it had to be because of the segregation around it, and part of it, because they wanted it to be, because it wasn't intentional space, but you also had this era of contradictions. So, you had this contradictions, one, contradiction in the carrying out of democracy in America, particularly in relation to black people. Two, you had these contradictions in

theology, and you had these contradictions and some measure in the ways of the church's witness. So, the church's witness in the 1960s, as opposed to earlier was different because of media. And so, there was media and there was worldwide attention to what was going on into the United States.

Kermit Moss:

And so, whereas before some of the contradictions, I called it, the paradox of being American, the American experience could be hidden. Now, a lot of those contradictions were on display and this was the emergence in some measures of the Cold War era. So, now there were these counter, I would say, nations that were vying for the bid, the nation who was the most preeminent in the world. And then there's black people and the experience of black people right in the center of this. Then you had, I would call this notion of hypocrisy. That was going on. So, the hypocrisy I called the contradictions, of inherent contradictions, particularly in the South and some measure and in North as well, because the North was complicit as well. And there I would call the de facto forms of racism in the North, whether that's what housing or jobs, et cetera.

Kermit Moss:

So, what you have here is this, these items, these hypocrisy and inconsistencies, some of it particularly in the South was related to the notion of law and order, which is very important. So, you expose this idea, this notion, this rhetoric of law and order that was very prevalent in the South, and it came from Southern politicians, but law and order was double-sided. It was two-sided, it was unequal. So, law and order was to remain and keep the status quo, particularly for African-Americans, but law and order, when it came to the lives of African-Americans and to protect the life of African Americans, there was no law order or the law was not carried out in that way.

Kermit Moss:

And all of this hypocrisy was known and seen not only on the world stage, but also the [inaudible 00:09:07] was to be seen nationally. And the Black Church had always known about this, this sense of equity in terms of the ways of the law or the ways of even theology. So, therefore, I wouldn't say our siblings in the faith would be around. Some measures that we might have even some interaction, but in the ways of it carry out and all around. But in addition, in the ways that the church responded to it, particularly non African-American churches, we began to see some real inconsistencies.

Kermit Moss:

This was an era of Black Church in the midst of racial violence. I would call it an era of terror. So, if you look at historical, wherever there is, I would say black progress, it is always followed by an era of terror. Whether that is from reconstruction, whether that's up until the Jim Crow era, anytime you see that, that's the terror. But the question becomes Black Churches in some measure had to be safe havens and a space of survival and the space of empowerment with this era and ethos of terror all around it. So, it was a very dangerous space to be a Black Church. Now, one thing that's important in terms of the 1960s and Black Church, and even to the present, Black Church is not homogeneous. You have your historic black denominations. You have Black Churches that would identify as Black Churches and white denominations of may non-denomination, but every Black Church in some measure was not... everyone wanted freedom but not every church participated in the civil rights movement. That's very, very important.

Kermit Moss:

And even some of the myths of Black Church aren't true. So, one of the myths of Black Church is that black wholeness and black Pentecostal churches were so pietistic, that they didn't participate within civil rights activity or activity for justice. That's just not true. There were churches in Memphis and churches across the country who in some measure, they was some level of participation in this particular activity in terms of, for human freedom and human flourishing. And so, what was going on in the 60s, particularly in relation to the Black Church, you had what I call a few models. Models of church. So these models of church, or models of pastoral leadership, some of these models intersect. So, there's always these intersections, but there were these primary models.

Kermit Moss:

One model is they were churches that were pastoral. So, during this time of inequity, during this time of injustice, during this time of terror, they would be churches who could be classified as pastoral churches, or churches or pastors that head at this pastoral approach. So, all churches in some measure had a pastoral approach, but some churches in that era, the pastoral approach was simply the care of souls. So, simply. The care of souls is not a bad thing, but in some measure, the care of souls can be the daily operations of the church, the worship liturgy, the pastoral care, funerals, marriages, funerals, all those things. But in some measure, not an analysis of what's going on in the communities or the world around it but not so pietistic that there is no activity or programming that relates to some of the social ills.

Kermit Moss:

I will call it charitable works, feeding programs, literacy, et cetera, et cetera. Then you would have, in that time, I call it pietistic churches. So, pietistic churches in some measure, whether they were at apostolic or whether they were in whether at Wesleyan traditions or whether they were even, I would say, Black Churches with maybe Baptist or with kind of evangelical leanings. And evangelical and those ways that after individual salvation, the sort of individualism, then there was not a critique of the world and not even an engagement with it, because the approach to making the world better was to simply be a better person. To draw closer to God, to have more knowledge, to pray more. But to in some measure, to stay detached from the activities of what's known as the world.

Kermit Moss:

Then you had a third approach. The third stream that's been in African-American churches throughout time, whether they were implicit and explicit, whether they were in harsh harbors, where individuals who desire to worship freely, were these, I would say these freedom elements. Some people would call them emancipatory, some people would call them liberatory, I'll call them freedom elements. Were these freedom elements that individuals just want to be free. They want to be free to worship God. They want to be free to raise families. They want to be free to be in community together. And they want it to be free to walk and live in a dignity as individuals who were made in the image of God. And to live in that freedom and to bear witness to God's grace and love in the world as a free person who is a child of God and who has a relationship with God.

Kermit Moss:

Is really freedom. And within that, there is connection to the prophetic tradition. So, the prophetic tradition is a freedom tradition. And it begins with a desire to have relationship with God. But then whatever elements obstruct that freedom to be free to live, to be free to raise your children and within the American context, to be free to be granted all of the rights and freedoms as an American citizen. So,

in some measure, the appeal to democracy, particularly with King and individuals who were connected to affiliate with King, it was the appeal to democracy in the Black Church that was very important. Whereas in the nation of Islam, they were individuals who were in such despair. And when I said, despair, not despair within an existential sense, despair and sense of us seeing the animus and the duplicity and the hypocrisy, not only in government, but in the church where the black or white and that despair that you know what, I'm going to go an alternative route.

Kermit Moss:

But at some measure, Black Churches, they were working with King and individuals who identified being Christian, Black and otherwise. They conjecture to the appeal of democracy and even the founding documents as kind of, these are the ways that America should be. And so, we as individuals who love God, but we're also part of this nation, we're going to hold America accountable to what it said, that's what King was saying. And so, there was this appeal. And so, what would happen is individuals who were antagonistic towards sense of black freedom, or really if they want to maintain the status quo. Well, I think it was interesting as individuals, even in church who wanted to maintain the status quo, weren't at the table. So, they weren't at the table. You could have these individuals who's identified in certain ways, but they want at the table determining policy and some measures, they did benefit in some ways similar, in some ways dissimilar than black people.

Kermit Moss:

And all of this is going on at the church. And you got this prophetic tradition, it's prophetic, not in the sense of trying to speak to the future. Individual future, like "You're going to get a car or a house, praise the Lord, prophet [crosstalk 00:16:38]." Prophetic in the sense of expounding messages, that what they do two things, one that state what the world is supposed to be in God's eyes. And two, speak to elements within systems, within government and anywhere that are not aligning one with God's vision of the world and two what we would say and some people would say what the scripture says. And so, you're speaking truth to power, but you're speaking truth to power of the church based on what? It's based on the word of God. So, Black Churches have always, even in the 60s, Christ was the central figure, very central.

Kermit Moss:

And there was always a tradition that the word of God, the scriptures mattered, and let's look at the scriptures in terms of how do we respond and how do we live? And then in the 60s, you had all these things going on. One thing that's very important in the 60s that was going on, is the marked participation of young people. In some measure, which is different than down to some measure, which is similar to now. So, young people, all the way down to elementary school students, you get kids in Bible school, kids in I would say Sunday school who are participating in marches for the qualitative people, but it is juxtapose and built upon the foundation of their experience in church.

Chantel McHenry:

Why do you think the young people were engaged, so engaged at that moment in history? Was it because they had seen what had happened with their parents and grandparents? Was it their own convictions for their future, what they were looking forward to obtain in this nation that we were in? Why were they so engaged?

Kermit Moss:

I believe it's a combination of things. One, particularly as looking at the 1950s bus boycotts, et cetera, those young people in... so you're looking at a 10 year span. So, for some of those young people, particularly in some areas they grew up watching their grandparents, their aunts, their uncles, participating on some level and activity toward freedom. I would say, they had models to see, but those individuals, those models they were also in church on a Sunday, singing songs, lifting hands, caring for their communities, feeding people, loving people. So, it was a wonderful model to see. Two, I think was important as this, they began these transitions in generational transitions in church leadership. So, you remember King was a 26-year-old PhD minted student who began to pastor church.

Kermit Moss:

So, you begin to see these individuals like King and Fred Shuttlesworth and all these individuals who were trained theologically, but they might represent either a younger generation or bridge generation. So, they also came in watching their family members and other individuals in their community, but they also had a different fervor, a different zeal, not only as being young people, but also a different vision of what church should be and what America should be.

Chantel McHenry:

So, when you think about Dr. King and we're in the 60s, and of course we know that he was assassinated and there were lots of riots that broke out in our nation as a result of that. So, talk a little bit about how his death and the riots truly impacted the Black Church. The Black Church was already moving into this social justice, civil rights era. And now the pinnacle, the person you look to for leadership, for direction, for guidance, for hope and faith, not that they weren't looking to Christ, but that this, you now have a physical person that is here and present that's leading the charge and now he's brutally assassinated. Tell us what impact was that? What did it have on the Black Church?

Kermit Moss:

I would say you have two impacts. You have the first impact, is the impact that would be, I would call it the natural consequence of the death of someone who was so preeminent and so loved. And loved at least by certain elements of society in the Black Church, because not every individual on the Black Church, which is romanticized, even within Baptist churches, some people didn't get on board until later. But what did happen was this, there was a time of despair, I mean, and anger. You have a 100 cities across the nation where the individuals are expressing outrage and anger because of a person who talked, God talked and theology and represented so much, not only to the nation, but also to the Black Church. If this individual can be murdered for doing what we know is right, then that means that any person at any time can be murdered for doing what's right.

Kermit Moss:

So, now you have this sense of despair, a sense of anger, a sense of discouragement within and without outside the Black Church. But the other element within the church is this, you have individuals who continue to take on the work. People like Fannie Lou Hamer, who pick up the mantle and continue to do the work. But the basis of doing the work is their strong faith in God and their connection to the Black Church. There was a professor called Smith. So, he wrote about Y T Walker. Y T Walker he did a sermon at Princeton Theological Seminary after King's death. And you talk on the students and students who had to try to figure out, "What do we do? Where do we go?" And so, one thing he tried to get the students to think about which the Black Church needs to think about now, but what was important then to move forward was not to romanticize or continue to go back to [inaudible 00:23:02].

Kermit Moss:

And so, what he tried to conjuncture, or tried to suggest that students should do and even in churches, they had to do was when Walker said this, he said, "Not by wishing or hoping or praying or anything else can find any day when things were better." So, Frederick Douglass would say, "I prayed, I prayed, and I prayed with my legs and nothing happened so I did something." So, Black Churches had to do what, they have to recuperate even in loss and pain and suffering, because that's what black people I had to do, to persevere, even in the midst of pain, suffering and things that are pretty traumatic to continue to move forward. So, people begin to pick up the mantle and they move forward, with the same work, the prophetic work. Some of the pietism, which is good, some of the pastoral work.

Kermit Moss:

But in recognition and the new direction, for some, at least initially it was taking on with King's mental or one of his mentors, Howard Thurman was taking on the interiority, that if God transforms us within, then it should translate to our love for our neighbor, but in addition, it should translate into our work to make our world better.

Kermit Moss:

So, now that mantle was picked up, how do we make our world better, but still identify as a Christian? But now you also have going on here as this, is the beginning of the verbiage. I would say the statements of black power, because now it's okay. If this doesn't work, civil rights is not working, then now what is the conversation that needs to be heard and what's the approach? So, now you got theologians who've been even during the King time, thinking about theological ramifications, formulations. And King's death, in some measure, it helped to spur these new theological conversations among black people in relation to how we as black Christians do respond to white racism.

Chantel McHenry:

And part of that response, which we've touched on slightly is of course there were riots that broke out. So, some might say that that's not a Christian thing to do. It's not an appropriate response as a Christian. Can you just speak to that a little bit? Can you educate us on why an individual, a group of people, a community would feel so enraged? Probably, really at the center of that is hurt and pain, that it would come out in a way that you would destroy property and things of that nature, but yet you're still a believer.

Kermit Moss:

That's a great question. And so, it's really, one some individuals that have a sense of despair. And two, it depends on which side of the coin? So, what's interesting is this the 1960s that has real similarities to right now. So, in terms of, I would say my white siblings in Christ, and even doing that ethos then, there were a number of conspiracy theories then, really interesting to do the research. So, there were these conspiracy theories that were feeling rage. Conspiracy theories of agitators and outsiders and people being paid. Those theories were out there and they were fueling the fire. So, on one end, if you have individuals that have these theories, these ideologies that are fueling the fire, for some, they feel that they're losing the grip on a nation then, for some is that they're losing that sense of who they are, their sense of identity.

Kermit Moss:



Then they begin to act out, is the acting out in rage. The difference between the civil rights movement, is one King had a strategy that was based upon, he would say theological belief and the pragmatic belief in non-violence. But when you see King who expound on violence die, I would say in some measure, it's almost shocking that the person who expounds on non-violence dies by violence. Now you've got these people, the black people that had their foot on their neck for years. And now we have individuals who are living in after, I would say, these neighborhoods beginning to change, slowed the emergence of white flight. It hasn't really taken place all the way. It's just a starting emergence of it. And you have individuals living in these segregated areas and some very province particularly in the North. That's the explosion.

Kermit Moss:

And King would say, the explosion is what? Is the voice of those who've been... the riots, or simply the voice of the people. And so, why, the question is not the why, the question, the why is how did it get there? So, what sometimes people like to do is do the critique of simply the expression, the expression of anger and pain. But before we can simply critique the expression, we've got to critique the why. And so, for us as individuals in the church, we're not critiquing simply or trying to resolve the what. We as individuals have to deal with, what are the elements that help to create this, and what are we as church individuals, whether we're in prayer and programming and working with doing justice work, to try to do this, to try and make this better so that we don't have to get to these expressions of rioting and rage, et cetera.

Chantel McHenry:

Absolutely.

Kermit Moss:

What we'd like to do is say that's wrong and then give a critique, be rhetorical, demonize it, downplay it and move on.

Chantel McHenry:

Yeah, because what we're dealing with is just the symptom of what is at the root. And if we never get to the root and begin to deal with what is rotten and contaminated and unholy in some ways at the root then we are dealing with behavior, as you say, and not necessarily with the true cause of why you see people in the streets say very loudly with their voices, that justice is important and imperative for a population of people. Can you do something for me? I'd love for you to parallel sort of what we're seeing today, versus what we saw in the 60s. It almost feels like we're on the same track, headed in the same direction. And as the church, the Black Church, we are still requesting, demanding, asking for the same thing.

Kermit Moss:

They're really interesting parallels, historically, when you begin to look. One, I was... Because sometimes we don't think that because we're still historically removed some of us from the 1960s, some of us weren't even born then, I wasn't even born then.

Chantel McHenry:

I was.



Kermit Moss:

[crosstalk 00:30:42] so we're so removed in some ways historically. And some contexts, because not every experience of blackness is the same. But there were some things, there were these conspiracies there were out there that fuel anger. There was the demonization of black leaders, that was very consistent then and very consistent now. So, there was this demonization of black leaders who, in some measure, they weren't preaching the gospel or they were instigating trouble. The same type of demonization of individuals, that was the same type of violence against Black Churches, physical edifices.

Kermit Moss:

We just saw them two weeks ago in Washington, D.C. There's violence against these edifices, these black spaces, this same violence that takes place and took place with Dylan Roof, this type of violence that not just is outside of, but now approaches those spaces. There's a really, really in some measure, send the message to the Black Church, then there's, you see this opportunism that's really in front of it. This opportunism within black clergy, to cozy up to power. And so, even in the 1960s, you had Elder Lightfoot Solomon Michaux. He was a radio evangelist, kind of popular. And so, kind of individual salvation, et cetera, et cetera, but PhD student before now, Dr. Lauren Martin wrote a paper on him. Did some research on him. And actually this individual was one, he was discrediting King publicly, radio, et cetera.

Kermit Moss:

This black other preacher, discrediting the work of King. But what individuals don't know is he also worked with J Edgar Hoover in the FBI. So, he was working with the FBI, formerly the documents are there to discredit, when also in other ways to try to be a counterweight to King. Same stuff now but you got these preachers. Some cozy for power, for their own motivations, their own, et cetera, et cetera. So, now you've got these counterweights, you have movement here, you have individuals here for whatever reason who discredit or demean or antagonistic to, instead of trying to either understand, or to be a part in ways that they can be a part. Then you have this participation of young people still which really, really interesting because I would say in Black Churches, I would say maybe 1990s, kind of gen X, you didn't have this type of robust participations, public witness, this public faith that you have now.

Kermit Moss:

And so, you have these parallels of these young people, more than people would recognize espoused to some sense of no Christianity or Christian identity, even if they don't attend church. They say, "You know what? I believe in the teachings of Jesus." But they're really participating. You also have this cross-cultural kind of intermingling of individuals across racial and ethnic lines that are working for a more equitable world, which that should be deemed as a positive. And even in some measure individuals across, I would say religious expressions, whether you got these Jewish and Christian individuals working together, not some, then some didn't and some don't now. But you still begin to see this cross-pollination of individuals from a broad face perspective working together for not just the good of black people, but ultimately the good of the nation. And then the parallel, which is really interesting with pastors, is you have what I know as the silence of preachers, who King wrote about in his letter from Birmingham jail.

Kermit Moss:

You either deal with the silence of preachers regarding what's going on now, the complicity of preachers and what's going on now, or, in some measure the King of antagonism or critique of what his white clergy moderates. So, they attack the methods, they critique Kings methods, and then they have this kind of linear perspective on history that just wait, it'll happen in due time. And no change happens in due time. There would be no American revolution if individuals were waiting for things to change in due time. And so, you have all of these things going on, and now you got the Black Church. And Black Church is doing what, still preaching, serving, loving, working for good, helping children, sending kids to school, trying to be faithful to their witness to God, but also being faithful to what the world should be in a kind of eschatological vision, kind of a realized eschatology that all Black Churches weren't waiting for the by and by.

Kermit Moss:

That was Malcolm X's critique that the problem with Black Churches, they waiting for pie in the sky by and by, and weren't doing anything. Now, what's interesting is that King and the later King began to do two things, he said the greatest representation of the gospel not only transforms the person in terms of their salvation, but also that salvation is seen in terms of the world. In terms of how the church is witnessing the world. So, it's not just that I'm saved but if I'm saved and the hungry feed me.

Chantel McHenry:

Let me ask you, why do you think that the federal government, you mentioned the FBI, we know that there's records that show that they were tapping into Dr. Martin Luther King's phone conversations and things of that nature. Why do you think that the federal government would believe that the Black Church would be a threat to the nation?

Kermit Moss:

Two things, one because the Black Church, was the black space. When I said a black space, I mean, this, the Black Church then was one of the only spaces, institutions that was controlled by black people. So, it wasn't under that control. And so, therefore, when you have spaces that are not under control from outside, from within, sometimes the ways of white supremacy, the ways of racism, they don't look at those spaces as places of worship, places of fellowship, places of gathering, they can begin to look at those places as places of citation, places of insurrection toward a particular status quo or ways that the world is that benefit some people but don't benefit other people. In some measure, they look at those spaces and the Black Church is problematic because it fuels the idea of the black Messiah. And there was always a fear of the black Messiah.

Kermit Moss:

And it was always the fear, those fears, even going back to the days of slavery, the fears of what would happen if these black people rise up. These fears, some of these ways of freedom took place in the ways of Harriet Tubman, that because of her faith, she led people through swamps and hush harbors to freedom, because of her sense of belief in God, I believed this was right. But on the other spectrum, you have Nat Turner, a slave preacher who in turn had the same visions that God wanted people to be free, but he chose a different response. And that response was there was violence. And so, is the threat of one losing your property, losing your capital, capital go away therefore, you lose your economic benefit, or two, is the fear of black people rising up. And where would they arise up, they rise up in these free spaces called the Black Church.

Chantel McHenry:

When in essence, the Black Church was just asking for equality and equity to live in a nation that we had been brought to, and to experience the American dream as it said, as our white counterparts. And very, very, very interesting. So, tell me maybe two or three accomplishments, triumphs, maybe the Black Church has had over the last 40 or 50 years.

Kermit Moss:

So, a couple of things, one, the Black Church is accomplished and has continued to be accomplished in changing economies, in changing presidencies, in changing world climates. Whether you go from the coal world to Vietnam, you name it, there's always been this continuity of the care for people's souls. Black Churches do a wonderful job, and continue to term of the care for the soul. But if the care for the soul, the soul is described in a broader sense. The soul is, there's this understanding of the importance of spiritual formation of the spirit. There is understanding of the mind and understanding of real concern and care dealing with the emotions of black people, because of the absurdity and the paradox and contradictions within the American context. So, Black Church does a good job of being church and always as a persevering church. Black Church in the last particularly, probably 40 years have done a fantastic job at community building.

Kermit Moss:

So, community building is twofold. One is the continuum building of community within communities, even as communities were after, I would say desegregation after black people began to move to suburbs, et cetera, et cetera. There's still that sense of community building and bonding even when people come into these spaces. The spaces of affirmation, love, community, family, familiarness, Black Church has done a fantastic job of that. But in addition, as Black Churches have, some of them went to community development models. Black churches have begun to do great, great work and great ministry where government and someplace has shrunk or policies have changed. Black church did not shrink, Black Church begin to expand their work of ministry in terms of beginning to build housing, beginning to do community development, starting, I would say, credit unions financial literacy schools, you name it.

Kermit Moss:

Black Churches have done really creative and innovative things, but important things that have helped in the daily life of black people, as they have helped to nurture the black spirit. And people have drawn closer to Christ. The Black Church in terms of even you look at Pew studies, et cetera, et cetera, then now I have some questions about the methodology of some of it. But if you look, the Black Church has actually grown. So, whereas America has been in terms of a decline, in terms of within Christianity, one of the few groups that has not had a decline other than kind of causalism, but with an ethnic racial groups, the Black Churches have continued to grow. Some say 1%, some would say more, some would say it didn't decline. So, even in a day of decentering of the church and a day of some people would say post-racial, I mean, that post-racial because that's a lie, but post-religious, and well post-religious space, how is it that Black Churches have not died?

Kermit Moss:

Well, continue in some measure to grow. Now, some Black Churches have died and that's okay, that happens. It's a cycle of church. But there's still that continuity that the Black Church has a place of importance within the community. But one area that Black Church has done really well. And it's to continuing of a carry on or traditional public faith. That our faith is not just for the individual, but our

faith must be lived publicly, that our faith and expressions of faith bear witness in the world, that our faith is important because it not just for us to get to heaven, but now how do we as Christians begin to engage in the world that we live in? But also I have discourse related to things that are important to the lives of people in our communities and what does the scripture have to say about things that help in human flourishing and help to build community?

Kermit Moss:

Black Church has done an incredible job of that. And in some measure continues to do a job of living a very public faith. In some measure, I would say this, it is antagonistic, I would say, let me go further, hypocritical expressions of our faith in public in America right now that have contributed to individuals saying, "I don't want to have anything to do with the church."

Chantel McHenry:

True.

Kermit Moss:

And then lastly, what's happened is this which Black Churches have done as this, is encouraging generations of young people, not only to continue to pastoral ministry. Black Churches have good mechanisms of apprentices systems typically. We're not looking for ministers, some denominations are going down because they can't find ministers. But the apprenticing of these young people that have a sense of call, and then in addition, Black Church, which they didn't do before, is these encouragement of individuals to continue to get theologically trained to be the new theological voices and new voices scholarship, in terms of biblical interpretation, ethics, et cetera, that can help the work of the Black Church. They're really doing a much better job.

Chantel McHenry:

So, as we bring our conversation to a close, I'd love for you to talk about just where do you see the Black Church going? I mean, we're coming out of a pandemic, we're still in it, we're just trying to crawl our way out of it. We are in the midst of social, racial injustice. And as you said, the rising up of the younger generation, which I'm so pleased to see, of all walks of life, all racial backgrounds coming together to demand equality in our nation. Where do you see the Black Church going? Do you see the Black Church continuing to be as it always has been? Is it more open to becoming more of a multiracial church versus just the Black Church? What will the Black Churches role be moving forward?

Kermit Moss:

I'm excited about the future of the Black Church. Excellent. These are the questions that you have to weigh, whether there is thinking was Dr. Glaude right in his article that the Black Church is dead, not dead in the sense of participation or attendance, but dead in romanticizing its role, dead in its sense of mission, dead in its work on community. So, in those ways, I think that there is tremendous hope for Black Church. One, because as I would say, prosperity gospels, ideas of what success is in Black Church, those are changing. I think that's important. These gospels that were very prevalent, 1980s, 1990s. They don't have the same, I would say momentum. And then you add that to COVID, which now is this the recognition that buildings don't matter, it's your mission.

Kermit Moss:

So, now, Black Church is at a crucible, just like other churches regardless of, were they multicultural or homogeneous? Everyone is at the crucible of, "Where do we go now?" So, I think Black Church, isn't an exciting space. One, because it has to innovate. Some churches will not make it out of COVID, they will not. They will not financially. They will not in a sense of relevance to their community, and they will not in the sense of what their neighbors think of them in terms of what they did during COVID. They won't make it. Some won't make it because they won't transition well. Some people like to stay on way too long, for whatever reasons, instead of moving on. They won't make it. But for the ones that do make it, they will be innovative, they will be missionary driven. They will be at the participation of young people will be at the front forefront.

Kermit Moss:

I believe that community building will continue to be at the forefront, but there will be some type of, I would say, the gospel will be important. These good news in the sense of the transformation of persons, but these persons now going out into the war to transform their world, that will be very, very preeminent important. I don't think some things will be as important. They will be, the performative aspect of preaching, I don't know if it's going to be as important. Black Church, we like preaching.

Chantel McHenry:

Yes, we do.

Kermit Moss:

The preaching is important. We do. The script is important, but some of those things won't be as important as the mission. What does the church do? Who is the church reaching? I'm excited about Black Church because now we can focus on our commitments, our commitment to Christ, our commitment to community, our commitment to neighbor. And not a commitment to being the next this person, or having the next church that's on this network because all of the things don't matter. And I'm excited about the young, the seminarians that I teach and that I'm in interaction with, that I get to partner with and listened to because they are individuals who are... they have a real heart for God and their desire to really make a difference in the world. So, I think the Black Church is... In some measure I'll state this is, maybe there's an awakening. And not the awakening of nationalism. And I would say, racial identity politics that we saw a few weeks ago, that's no identity.

Kermit Moss:

And some of those individuals are calling for that as an awakening, but that's not an awakening. I believe that it'd be a time of that the Black Church can help to spearhead reconciliation, solidarity, work, justice work and otherwise. Now, do I see Black Churches becoming more multicultural? That only depends on is this momentum toward a more equitable world that is kind of the solidarity base that goes beyond racial identity, the same with young people. If that translates the church, then we'll see a sense of multiculturalism in Black Church. But I don't know if that's going to take place, one, because sometimes individuals who can work on these things, they have a very difficult time being in a space that you have black leadership.

Chantel McHenry:

Very, very true. And and yes, the commitment for the Black Church to Christ, to community and to its neighbor. I think those were your words and very very apparent of where we are going as the Black Church. And I appreciate, Pastor Moss coming on today. It's just been a pleasure, not just to talk to you,

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but to hear your wisdom, for you to share your your theological understanding of the Black Church, of the nation, of the word that sustains us and will ultimately move us forward to hopefully a more peaceful nation to live in and a more equitable place to raise our children and our family. So, thank you very much for your time today.

Kermit Moss:

Thank you, I really appreciate the opportunity.

Speaker 1:

Thanks for listening to this important series on the history and evolution of the Black Church. We hope you learned as much as we did from this conversation. At Vanderbloemen, we're passionate about helping Christian organizations build and maintain an environment where people of different backgrounds, cultures, and interests can come together to advance the Kingdom in a fuller way. Please reach out to us if you're interested in our diversity consulting practice, or if we can serve you in any way. Thanks for listening.