

“IT’S A MIRACLE: ACHIEVING “NORMALCY” WITHIN THE BLACK  
CHURCH AMONGST DISABLED INDIVIDUALS

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## DEDICATION

For my husband, Timothy Veal Jr., and my children, Wynton and Aviram, thank you for your never- ending love and support. And to all of those who identify as Black, Christian, and disabled-I will always fight for you.

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## ABSTRACT

JESSICA VEAL

### “IT’S A MIRACLE: ACHIEVING “NORMALCY” WITHIN THE BLACK CHURCH AMONGST DISABLED INDIVIDUALS

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This qualitative study investigated the intersection of disabled individuals within Black churches and the examination of identity acceptability as it relates to physical and spiritual wholeness. The study interviewed six participants, exploring how disabled Black Christians perceived their disabilities, and attained normality in the Black church community as they strive towards achieving spiritual wholeness. In this study, participants expressed that their wholeness had to be redefined. In addition, I also explored the influence of song and scripture within this journey, the power of resilience in the Black Christian community, and the expectation of healing of those with invisible disabilities.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....	4
II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	7
INTERSECTIONALITY .....	7
DISABILITY .....	8
THE BLACK COMMUNITY AND DISABILITY .....	10
III. METHODOLOGY .....	14
DESIGN.....	14
PROCEDURES.....	15
PARTICIPANTS .....	17
ANALYTICAL PLAN .....	18
IV. RESULTS .....	19
INSPIRATION THROUGH SCRIPTURE AND SONG.....	22
POWER OF RESILIENCE IN BLACK FEMALE CHRISTIANS .....	27
EXPECTATION OF HEALING WITH INVISIBLE DISABILITY .....	30
ACCESSIBILITY .....	33
V. CONCLUSION.....	37
LIMITATIONS AND STRUGGLES .....	40
REFLEXIVITY.....	43
SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS .....	43
REFERENCES .....	46

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Christians, as a whole, believe and acknowledge the miraculous behaviors of Jesus that are performed in the New Testament: the blind receiving sight, the lame walking, and other instances of divine healing. This example given by Jesus created a longing for “remarkable encounters, healings, and deliverances” amongst those who are disabled today (Sande 2019:3). The concern is not for those who believe in miracles and deliverance; it is a part of the faith culture of Christians to believe that these are still happening due to the circulation of testimonies about the great things that God is doing in the lives of believers. However, the issue at hand rests with those who still have their disability, thereby, resulting in “exclusion and stigmatization when persons with disabilities try to integrate themselves into mainstream [worship]” (Sande 2019:3).

Although forms of expression may vary, the religious pattern amongst traditional Black church is very common: “scriptural interpretation, emphasis on the spiritual and temporal needs of congregants and community members, reliance on spirituals, call-and-response, gospel music, and prayer” (Barnes 2005:970). This common sect of ritual, originating from slavery, has created an unbreakable link between the Black community and the Black church. There is a certain level of indebtedness that the Black church holds within the history of Black culture. Through slavery, the rituals of singing and praying were used in all types of forms, such as escaping or in the field. During the Civil Rights Movement, the Black church was used to educate congregants of their rights as human

citizens and rights to vote. In addition, Black churches have been key contributors to the formation of Black banks, Black colleges, and other institutions that contributed towards the success of Black individuals today. The role of the Black church has been very impactful towards its members over the years. Pattillo-McCoy (1998:769) describes it as an “anchoring institution,” owned and operated by black people and the center of activity in Black communities.

Although a positive force, King (1998:37) notes that “the Black church may itself contribute to the discrimination of some of its own members—the physical and mental disabled.” The Black church is vital in the prosperity of the Black community, but it may have unfortunately “created invisible barriers and practices that disable those that are disabled” (Sande 2019:2). The acts toward achieving physical wholeness, such as praying or praising away the disability are potentially rooted in social oppression created by society as a whole, not only Christianity. While the church is called to accept individuals of all types, the assumption usually falls within the frame of race-because race is the answer to being more inclusive. Nonetheless, while racial diversity is achieved, other factors are neglected such as: body types, abilities, disabilities, class, and so on. “if one is poor, black, elderly, disabled, and lesbian, must these differences be organized into a hierarchy such that some differences gain prominence over others?” (Erevelles and Minea 2010:129). My intention with this study was to investigate inclusivity and destigmatization amongst those who identify as disabled and desire to seek fulfillment of their spiritual wholeness.

While there may be hints of the social oppression amongst disabled individuals within the Black church within the realm of Christianity, the Black voices within academia are silent. However, there are articles that discuss how Black people are more likely to have disabilities due to the lack of resources; but there is a very limited amount of information that approaches the social context of disability within the Black community. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), one in four Black people identify as disabled (Courtney-Long et al. 2017), yet the absence of Black culture as it intersects with religion, or any other foundational social construct within the culture is even more scarce. This study explores the intersectionality of race, religion, and disability—speaking up for a community that is often glazed over due to the generalization of experience by a predominately white society.

In this thesis, I investigated the intersection between experiences of disabled individuals within Black churches and the examination of identity acceptability as it relates to physical and spiritual wholeness. The study utilized in-depth, semi-structured interviews of the accounts of disabled individual's perception and experiences within their church. The interviews provided a new understanding of how disability affects Black Christians. While there is an abundance of literature regarding disabled white men and women, there is very few when it comes to the Black Christian community. This study was conducted to further enlighten the Black Christian community (as well as other communities) about the idea of identity acceptability as it relates to physical and spiritual wholeness.



## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

I explored the lived experiences of Black disabled individuals within the church setting. The following questions guided my research:

- How do disabled Black Christians perceive their disabilities?
- Can spiritual wholeness be obtained with physical limitation?
- How can a disabled individual attain a sense of “normality” and acceptance regarding his/her physical status within the church community, while still seeking to achieve spiritual wholeness, though they may deviate from traditional conceptions of physical wholeness?

In Chapter 2, I further discuss literature that has been carried out in this, and related, areas to date. I specifically explore work on disability concepts from both a social, as well as medical, standpoint. Additionally, I construct an intersectional framework based on theorists Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s intersectionality constructs to examine how race, religion, and disability status interact. As previously mentioned, while there is information present regarding the medical construct of disability and race, there is a scarce existence of other stigmatizing and oppressive factors. Traditionally, intersectional frameworks have not included disability as one of its examined axes of domination, such as gender, race, or class. In Chapter 3, I present the methodology for this study and my analytical approach. I include an overview of the research design, procedures for data collection, and a discussion of how I performed the analysis. Chapter 4 presents both the results of the study. I describe a variety of themes emergent from the data to highlight the fruitfulness of qualitative data

through the interviews that were retrieved from the participants. To echo the truths and perspectives of those interviews, I focus very heavily on the transcriptions of the participants in this portion of the chapter. I conclude with the discussion of the findings in Chapter 5, in addition to noting limitations and suggestions for further research.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### INTERSECTIONALITY

According to Gillborn (2015:278), “the term [intersectionality] addresses how multiple forms of inequality and identity inter-relate in different contexts and over time, for example, the interconnectedness of race, class, gender, disability”. Sociologists, such as Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw have challenged the universalization of racial and gendered subjects in their research, leaving white women to represent the category of women and black men to represent the category of black. Furthermore, while the collection of literature on the interaction between race and gender barely exists, the interaction of disability and other stigmatizing factors is scarce (Shaw et al. 2012:83). Traditionally, disability has not been examined as an axis of domination in this scholarship. Sociologists, such as Patricia Hill Collins, uses other systems of oppression such as race, class, gender, age, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity to show how such categories interlock and foster intersectional scholarship. The reality is that *all* of our identities interact, creating divergent experiences with society. In other words, to treat disability as a white experience does as much to obscure the reality of lived experiences as treating all women as white or all Black persons as male. During the emergence of Feminist disability studies, the male dominated perspective of disability rights was later critiqued; however, in their attempts to inform, they excluded the experiences of women of color. The resolution to these issues resides in the analytical framework of

intersectionality. In her work, *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins insists that both the changed consciousness of individuals and the social transformation of political and economic institutions constitute essential ingredients for social change.

Unfortunately, much of the Eurocentric masculinist worldview fosters Black women's subordination by objectifying African-American women and recasting our experiences to serve the interests of elite white men. This system shows while other groups may encounter different experiences within other dimensions of it, race, class, and gender are the issues of oppression that characterize the experiences of Black women, which further solidifies how impossible it is for the experiences of Black women to be spoken for, according to this framework.

## DISABILITY

While the Black church is the central haven to the social, economic, and political development of the Black community, there is very little information regarding the influence on those with disabilities. However, it is known that the level of disability advocacy and outreach in Black churches is limited (King 1998:39). According to the Americans with Disabilities (ADA), churches are exempt from Title III of the ADA, which addresses disability-based discrimination, including ensuring access to goods and services, making reasonable policy modifications, and communicating effectively with individuals who have vision, hearing, or speech disabilities. This further affirms the institution of “church,” although being held to high level of sanctity and sacred space, becomes a place of exclusion for those with disabilities. Shakespeare (2010) draws a clear distinction between social disability and medical impairment in his analysis of the

social model: “while disability is imposed by social exclusion, impairment is due to physical limitation” (Shakespeare 2010:3). Shakespeare illustrates the medical model as the status of an individual’s physical condition, focusing on their deficit to be cured; whereas, the social model views disability as a cultural and historical phenomenon, thereby distinguishing them as an oppressed group (Shakespeare 2010:197). Further, he points out that “disability is something imposed on top of an individual’s impairments, by the way they are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society” (Shakespeare 2010:3). If one were to switch out “society” with “church,” the same nature of oppression would most likely apply. Unfortunately, those with religious understandings [Christians] can be just as ableist, or even more ableist, than those with medical understanding alone to those who are disabled (Stahl 2020:166). The idea of being “fixed” or “broken” has many physical connotations to it in the church, and when the cultural perspectives of disability are inserted into a culturally structured organization, such as the church, these ideas of exclusion and limitation follow. According to Stahl (2020), “many Christians single out people with disabilities as representative of the universal need for healing, both spiritual [social] and medical” (165).

Likewise, researchers found dominant perspectives about disability in Western society construct disability as a deficit, impairment, and individual tragedy rather than a system of oppression, form of identity, or variant of human diversity. This matters, because when focusing on the deficit models within literature, there is more of a primary focus on rehabilitation and cure of the body to alleviate negative social, physical, and economic outcomes thought to be caused by the impairment. According to disability

activists who reject the medical model, “problems of disability reside in the cultural attitudes and structural barriers for individuals” (Stahl 2020:174). In Christianity, “physical healing is the predominant way healing is understood, which can result in degradation of disabled bodies that refuse to be cured or normalized” (Stahl 2020:172). The idea of wholeness is important in this study because while the idea of physical wholeness exists, there is also a spiritual dimension to consider as well. Where society focuses on the tangible evidence [able bodies] for something to be whole, complete, fixed, etc., there should be a “universal need for healing,” rather than just focusing on disabled bodies (Stahl 2020:166).

## THE BLACK COMMUNITY AND DISABILITY

According to the National Disability Institute, African Americans have one of the highest rates of disability. Compared to white Americans, there is a scarcity in data describing their social characteristics. Researchers attribute this to the fact that African Americans have higher rates of poverty, lower rates of educational attainment, and are more likely to be employed in jobs that put their health and bodies in greatest risk in comparison to the white population. It is even worse amongst African American women, who face multiple barriers to resources and equitable treatment in society. These barriers lead to unfavorable solutions such as the lack of willingness to disclose their disability. Unfortunately, disabled African American’s face society with a “double oppression” in the broader society, as well as their own cultural communities (King 1998:37), and I would add that disabled African American women face society with triple. Ironically, a community with such a travailing history of struggle for inclusion and equality may itself

exclude and discriminate against its own people with disabilities. More ironically, the exclusion and discrimination may regularly be in the Black church (King 1998:37)—the sanctified institution of the community. Because of the potential of exclusion and isolation, “people of color, or any other oppressed group may feel compelled to choose to identify with their ethnic community over the disabled community, especially when the disability is one that is not visible to others” (McDonald, Keys, and Balcazar 2007). In such a racialized society, it is easier to neglect the characteristic that is not visible to others (ability status) while embracing the one that is (race). The refusal to disclose one’s ability status is not surprising considering the level of social oppression that is bestowed upon an individual for having a disability. In the case of this study, not only did the individuals battle one oppressive characteristic, but three—race, ability, and the status of their gender. However, publicly claiming a disability can be context specific, according to Alston, Bell, and Feist-Price (1996). While some African Americans may choose not to disclose all of the time, there are some where it’s not the focal point of their experience. This is primarily amongst other African Americans where the common experience of being a minority ethnically is more important and relatable to the individual than being disabled.

In a society that values achievement, physical health, and attractiveness, those with disabilities—especially those that are visible, encounter a generic stereotype that “you are less of a person if any of your functioning is impaired” (King 1998:38). We can trace this back to the value of our body during slavery—able-bodied workers were the more useful and desired slaves (Boster 2010). Post-slavery, in society where African

Americans engage in more laborious occupations, it still applies. Unfortunately, this shows how things have not changed. Not only does this exhibit the value of ability status for marginalized individuals towards the contribution of society, but the access to resources as well. It is often said, “If you don’t work, you don’t eat”— and with minorities being more likely to have more of laborious work-if their ability status is compromised, so is their access to resources. The National Disability Institute found that African Americans with disabilities seem to face double marginalization, discrimination and stigma that lead to poor socioeconomic outcomes. Even in broader society, this stigmatization and exclusion is within the communities of Black individuals as well.

According to the literature, Christians with disabilities have a mixed relationship with healing, while some might seek out medical or spiritual help, others do not due to pride or something with their cultural or self-identity. Unfortunately, disabled individuals within the Christian community are often singled out as needing healing, even though it may not be desired, thereby weaponizing their ableism and Christianity. This “necessity of healing” is the motivation for studying wholeness within the Church community. As Christians, we are called to achieve salvation, which is the pinnacle of Christianity—reaching heaven. That should be the goal of “wholeness;” however, there is more of a societal focus on the aspect of “wholeness”—physical healing. According to Stahl (2020), “all Christians are in need of healing and wholeness, regardless of the shape and function of their bodies” (166). Further, he continues to say that “rather than focusing on the ways individual bodies need to be “fixed” in order to be in relationship with God, services of healing and wholeness could instead point toward our universal need to



celebrate God's creation" (Stahl 2020:166). For many Christian denominations, healing goes beyond the physical cure, we recognize that we are embodied creatures, but we are also spiritual beings as well (Stahl 2020:171). This is the foundation of what I was interested in finding: the level of inclusion that my participants experienced within their church as it pertains to their spiritual wholeness. Does physical limitation equate to an inability to achieve physical wholeness? Does their inability to achieve physical wholeness affect their chance to achieve spiritual wholeness? It is my hope that finding these answers will place "the moral responsibility on society [church] to remove the burdens which have been imposed, and to enable disabled people to participate" (Shakespeare 2010:5).

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The intent of this study was to investigate the intersection between experiences of disabled individuals within Black churches, and identity acceptance as it relates to physical and spiritual wholeness. Three research questions guided this study. The first question explores how Black Christians perceive their own disabilities. The second question inquires about the ability to achieve spiritual wholeness with physical limitations/disabilities. Lastly, the third question involves achieving a sense of normality within the church community, while still seeking to achieve spiritual wholeness absent the association to physical wholeness or their disability.

#### DESIGN

Given the delicate and nuanced nature of disability within Black churchgoers, qualitative interviews were the most appropriate methodology to address my research questions. I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews that allowed me to explore the nature of the participant's experiences within their church as a disabled person. Semi-structured interviews permit probing the preset questions on the questionnaire, providing more enriched data during data collection (Savin-Baden and Major 2013). Although each question was addressed, matching the interview instrument, it should be noted that additional questions were also asked to the participants alongside the prepared probing questions to further understand and to take a more interactive approach towards qualitative interviewing. While it might be considered ill-mannered to pry and ask for

more details in an ordinary conversation had day to day; as an interviewer, your responsibility lies in helping your participants explore and articulate their intentions and meanings by asking clarifying questions and “going beneath the surface of the described experience” (Charmaz [2006] 2010:26; Ellis 2014:37).

All of my participants were Black Christian women, so having an insider status as a Black Christian woman as the interviewer was very beneficial. According to Savin-Baden and Major (2013), “insider fieldwork is an approach in which researchers investigate the contexts in which they work, study or socialize” (343). Furthermore, it is advantageous to be an insider because you have more knowledge and information about the subject at hand (Savin-Baden and Major 2013: 343). It was very important to understand how to implement certain concepts into the literature from the interview: such as, scriptural references and songs as well as references to church processes and leadership.

## PROCEDURES

I began this process by obtaining permission to conduct this study from the Institutional Review Board at Texas Woman’s University. Once approved, I recruited participants through Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter by posting a flyer. The original goal of this study was to focus exclusively on Black Apostolic Christians. However, due to the difficulties in recruitment, I decided to expand the inclusion criteria to all Black Christians. After making this modification, I sent the flyer to different individuals I knew and quickly I began gathering participants. Once I reached out to the first individual, most of the other participants came by word of mouth and the snowballing technique.

Each potential participant contacted me through my school email to gain more information about the study and set up an interview.

I conducted the interviews over the internet via Zoom. This format of data collection was most suitable because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and because I recruited nationwide via social media (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter). Video recording via Zoom eliminated some of the challenges of capturing both direct observation and listening simultaneously. Recording of the interviews through audio and video allowed for observation verification versus having to record all observations through note taking. The following questions were asked to each participant:

1. Let's start by talking about the church. How long have you been active in the church? What does being active in church mean to you?
2. You indicated you were disabled on the screening form. Tell me about your disabilities.

Probe: What is the nature of your disabilities? How long have they affected you?

3. [If the disability is invisible — do the members of the congregation know about your disability? If no, why not?] How have members of your congregation reacted to your disabilities?

Probe: Have they made you feel more welcome, or like an outsider? How so?

Probe: If they feel like they are accepted — Can you give me an example of when you felt accepted by the congregation?

Probe: If they feel like an outsider — Can you give me an example of a time you felt like an outsider?

4. Do you feel like your disabilities have excluded you from certain church activities? If so, what?

Probe: How did that make you feel? How did you react to how they treated you?

5. Has anyone made you feel like you need to be healed [by God?] or that you need to pray harder because of your disabilities?
6. Does your disability make you feel empowered? Or make you feel closer to God? Tell me more about that.
7. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your disability and your church?

## PARTICIPANTS

For this study, six respondents were interviewed. Of the six, four were members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) and two were Apostolic/Pentecostal. Because I modified my choice of denomination to all that identify as Christian, I was hoping to get a more diverse range of different denominations. I should note that I know most of the participants through church and have established acquaintanceships with them. While this may introduce an amount of favorability bias in the study, the delicate nature of disability in Black churches demands a certain level of trust between interviewer and interviewee. On a related note, this is a numerically small, but substantively important population. Therefore, the small sample matches the small population.

Prior to conducting the interview, I presented a consent form to the participant via email, providing a PDF of the consent form for an electronic signature. The participant

returned the signed consent form via email before the interview. To protect confidentiality, I collected all data, organized and analyzed the data, and wrote the results. Respondents were not identified with their data in the written report, even when direct quotes were used. Original names have been changed in order to protect confidentiality and participants have now been coded using pseudonyms solely known by myself. The key identifying the respondents was deleted as soon as the results were written. The audio-recordings were deleted as soon as transcripts were conducted, and all consent forms and transcripts are de-identified and stored in my home office.

#### ANALYTICAL PLAN

After obtaining data from the six respondents, I combed through the data for themes or common thoughts. Initially, I coded the data for common themes among the interviews that reoccurred among participants and looked for patterns among the experiences of those who identify as Black, Christian, and disabled. As I began to code, certain themes quickly manifested throughout multiple interviews, such as the idea of a redefined concept of wholeness. Meaning, life will continue; however, the journey has to be rerouted—which makes it look completely different than it was before. Second, there was an expectation for healing. This was a consistent finding, perhaps owing to the fact that most of the participants had an invisible disability. I also coded the power of resilience, which is a common theme within the Black community—especially among women—when it comes to disability. Finally, the inspiration of song and scripture is significant, as it is the foundation of their spiritual life is Christianity. These themes, along with supporting quotes, are discussed in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

To provide a foundation to the research questions in the interview, I began by asking about the nature of their involvement in church to gain more knowledge regarding their experiences and create a welcoming environment before diving into the topic of their disabilities. As an in-group member, it was not difficult to establish a platform of transparency; however, it was more difficult for them to discuss their limitations with their disability and how it affects their life. Regarding their experiences and perceptions of their disability in regard to the church setting, the participants were also asked about inclusivity, empowerment, and healing expectations. This chapter relays their responses in the voices of the participants and draws conclusions about their experiences. When half or more of the respondents' answers echoed one another, the responses were identified as a theme. The themes that were identified within the data were redefining wholeness, inspiration through scripture and song, power of resilience in Black female Christians, and accessibility.

#### REDEFINING WHOLENESS

Several participants redefined what healing was for them by way of a new perspective gained as a result of their disability. It is not a secret that many of the participants can no longer operate as they used to. Many spoke about not being able to walk, drive, use the bathroom on their own, and so on. Instead of being discouraged by their inability to do what is familiar, some focused on possessing gratitude for faculties

that they do have, while others have made up in their mind that this is their new way of life and are taking time to adjust to it. Society has put in the minds of others that 100 percent is always the goal, but these women show that wholeness can come in other forms that are not always physical. Through the interviews, I also found that the result of this was a greater effort to advocate and empower others who possess a similar disability or have family members who have similar issues:

P3: I was more focused on, you know, my healing, and being grateful that I was still alive. You know.

P3: ...there are some activities I probably will never do anymore, even though-like skiing. I did go skiing — not that I was, you know, a skier, but I have skied before and thought that I would do it some other time, you know...it's more likely that I will not. Because, you know, if I fall, you know, the tumbling and all of that...so um, I guess I've just come to the realization there's some things that I just won't try to do.

Because of her disability, P3 has innately limited herself from activities that she will and will not do. According to the social model of disability, we “unnecessarily” isolate and exclude ourselves from full participation in society (Shakespeare 2010:197). Instead of P3 suggesting alternatives, she excluded the possibility of engaging in the activity, or any activity similar to it. Unfortunately, the lack of self-esteem in the mind of a disabled individual limit and prevent them from activities that they really want to do (Shakespeare 2010:199). Not of any fault of their own, but by the barriers and limitations that society has placed on those who are disabled.



P3: I've accepted that no, it's not going to be 100 percent because it can't be...

P4: ...he's [God] going to heal you, and it might not be the healing that you, um —how am I going to say it—it's not what think it's going to be.

P4: So, maybe healing could be you're healed to the point to where you're able — I'm able to work. I'm able to talk to you.

In P3 and P4, there is an active redefinition of wholeness happening. However, it is evident that it manifested itself differently amongst the individuals in terms of how physical and spiritual wholeness is defined and achieved. While P3 has acknowledged their acceptance with the idea of being different, "...there are some activities I probably will never do anymore...so um, I guess I've just come to the realization there's some things that I just won't try to do" and also "I've accepted that no, it's not going to be 100 percent because it can't be...". P4 has shifted her perspective. Rather than feeling like she cannot do anything again, the expectation was cancelled. Therefore, while P3 and P4 are expressing that they are forever changed, P3 is more focused on what they cannot do and that they will not be 100 percent again, while P4 acknowledged the journey to achieving physical and spiritual wholeness while concurrently redefining the idea of self.

P4: I remember sitting on my bed getting chemo, like/and I said, this is why you told me to go to church — because this is what you need to get you through this journey. Um I'm going to get you here. I'm going to heal you, but it's going to/or you are asking for healing, but its's a different healing.

P4 mentioned "different healing." As previously interpreted, I believe this to mean going beyond your own expectation and exploring new ways to function. In

addition, this quote also demonstrates what the institution of church means to a believer with disability. The church can be a place of refuge, as well as one that restores. This is achieved through close examinations of the scriptures and the hope is found through praise, worship, and prayer. The emphasis that is placed on the church makes for a great transition to the inspiration of song and scripture in the life of disabled individuals.

### INSPIRATION THROUGH SCRIPTURE AND SONG

In Christianity, it is evident that the foundation of belief is found in scriptures from the Bible and songs that inspire through the proclamation of the gospel. However, culturally, church songs and scripture are more than just expression in the Black church—it is a language. During slavery, songs were used to communicate to runaways and each other in secret so that their master could not understand. During the Civil Rights era, songs were used to embrace community and connect emotionally, as Black people were lamenting over the oppressive behaviors that were taking place. During the interviews, I found that many participants referred to songs to lift their spirits or encourage themselves. In addition, they used scriptural text to make parallels to their life because often times in the given passage from the ones that were referred to, there was a positive ending.

#### *Song*

P1: ...I think at that time you are able to – with the illness, you are able to lean on and hear those songs, and say, Mm now I know what they mean. Now I know what we were saying...Father I stretch my hands to thee...no other help I know.

And then that being at the foot of the cross. And I know there's amazing grace  
how sweet the sound...

*Father, I stretch my hands to Thee,  
No other help I know;  
If Thou withdraw thyself from me,  
Ah, whither shall I go?*

This is a hymn written by Charles Wesley about God being the source of your help and guide. In the Bible, God is referred to as a guide or Shepherd, amongst other things. In the hymn, the writer expresses that we would be lost without God being present. If God is the shepherd, we are the sheep. In the quote, P1 was using the lyrics as an example of songs that are meaningful during her time of need. If we apply the meaning of the song to her situation, it is understood that God is her help. This assurance provides security that God is always there. Therefore, all you have to do is “stretch your hand out to him” and he will be with you.

P2: Instead of turning on that station or putting in that CD, I tend to lean toward the Christian, um, music because the words of the Christian songs is just touching. As a matter of fact, we lived not 15-20 miles from Houston. It was a town called Katy, Texas. And my son would drive us into the hospital every morning, and he — our theme song was Amazing Grace by Tremain Hawkins...we would hear that, it would just give me so much joy and feel so good throughout, you know. It — then nothing could stop you.

*Amazing grace  
How sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me  
I once was lost, but now I'm found  
Was blind, but now I see*

This is another hymn, popularized amongst believers and non-believers, about the grace of God. This song speaks to the beauty of salvation and in spite of someone being lost and blind (in sin/without God), God found them, and saved them (found/sight). Again, P1 uses this as an example of a song to lean on and how the significance of meaning affects her during this time in her life because this song just reiterates one's gratitude for salvation; and with salvation comes the eternal reward, heaven. P2 not only mentions the song, but the artist who sings it. Tremaine Hawkins is a famous Black gospel singer from the 1970s. Culturally, many songs depending on the genre and sound were used to unify and give hope. P2 says, "It would just give me so much joy and feel so good throughout, you know. It – then nothing could stop you," emphasizing a feeling of empowerment and good feelings.

### *Scripture*

P1: Yeah. Well...the answer I guess, would be yes, but that's when you lean on what Paul said. Whatever state I find myself in...I will be content.

This response references Philippians 4:11 [KJV] in the Holy Bible, "not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content." In this scripture, Paul continues to say, "I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound: everywhere and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need." A big part of this scripture is about finding peace, no matter the circumstances. This verse is very applicable to disability because it speaks to the extremes of seasons-highs and lows. Whatever state you find yourself in that day, find peace, find joy, and find contentment.

P1: So we feel like we going through a Job experience. You know, what would you do if he take everything you got? Would you still serve him? So the answer is yes. Because if doesn't do anything else he's done enough.

The book of Job is about a man named Job who served God well, but was stricken terribly in terms of his health; in addition, his animals, servants, crops were taken away and his children were killed. Although his wife just told him to "curse God and die," he did not and endured and God gave him double portion of land, more children, revives his health and gives him long life. Often, when one references a "Job experience," it means for the worst possible experience to be imagined. The whole point of this story is to exhibit true faith in God. Job's faith was definitely tested, and though bad times came, he overcame and was met with eternal joy and reward on the other side-naturally and spiritually. P1 mentions her allegiance and devotion to God, "What would you do if he take everything you got? Would you still serve him? So the answer is yes." In Job, he too served God unconditionally, after everything was taken from him he still magnified God: as stated in the Holy Bible in Job 1:21 [ESV]: naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I shall return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord". Because God is the one who created mankind and gave breath to every living soul, he is the one who has the power to take that breath away. P2's sentiments illustrated her way of accepting death as a possibility during her worst moments because of her full devotion to God. If you give your life to Christ (salvation), then you acknowledge that your life is no longer your own.

P1: And so when you are in a hospital room for three weeks laying in the bed and not able to move, not able to do anything for yourself, and you can just look up to heaven and say, here I am Lord, use me.

The term is church rhetoric, but it has a scriptural base. It originates from Isaiah 6:8 [KJV] in the Holy Bible: Also, I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me. The participant mentioned this scripture as a term of surrendering to God.

P1: Some people are looking for a parting of Red Sea. But it's not the Red Sea anymore that we're going to be walking on [through].

In the book of Exodus, Moses led the Israelites through the Red Sea to be led out of Egypt. So, by the power of God, Moses stretched out his rod and parted the sea so they could walk on dry ground. P1 was saying that people who are disabled are looking for a miracle of complete healing. Although they might be recovered, there will be unfamiliar adjustments that have to be made.

P3: I could say I exert—show—the fruits of the spirit more.

This is referring to Galatians 5:22-23, that lists the fruits of the spirit: traits that show you are in communion with Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance. P3 was referring to how her disability has developed her spiritual life. In a natural sense, to exhibit the fruits of the spirit, is to show good character. Christians believe that these traits develop in you with the help of the Holy Spirit. For example, if one is not naturally peaceful or loving, the Holy Spirit works inside of us and produces those things in us.

P4: When you say healing, we're saying healing in the sense that, um, if you touched Jesus's cloth-it's gone. God, I wish this was gone! [laughs].

This reference to Jesus's cloth is from Matthew 9:20. There was a woman who was diagnosed with abnormal hemorrhaging and because of the custom of that time, women who were on their cycles had to be removed from society until it ended; but this woman's cycle was ongoing. Out of desperation, she contradicted the practices of her culture, exposed herself in public just to get to Jesus for healing, "touched the hem of his garment", and was healed. P4 was reiterating the kind of healing that we were speaking of. In the quote, according to context she was asking if I was talking about healing where there is not any evidence that an illness was present. After she clarifies, she exclaims, "God, I wish this was gone" to further solidify the permanence of her disability. However, P4 acknowledges that healing can be subjective; she mentions after this quote, "So, maybe healing could be you're healed to the point to where you're able – I'm able to work. I'm able to talk to you," which hints to how wholeness has been redefined for her, understanding that this disability is a way of life.

#### POWER OF RESILIENCE IN BLACK FEMALE CHRISTIANS

Because I unintentionally ended up with a pool of Black women as participants, there was a consistent theme of resilience that floated through the interviews. In many forms, these women were determined to push through whatever physical adversities they had coming their way. Researchers explain that as empowering as the strong Black woman narrative may be to their surrounding community, it is also detrimental to their health and self-concept. This further shows us that "the strong Black woman trope has a

material reality that perpetuated not only through Black cultural expectations, but also through institutional structures that affect one's access to resources and life chances" (50). This is shown in two of the women that I interviewed. One woman mentioned that the church produced such a legalistic view of disability on her that she felt like if she mentioned anything she would be punished. While another woman, who is heavily involved in her sorority, continued to fulfill her obligations to her chapter even though she was temporarily residing in a rehabilitation facility.

P2: We were in the rehab, not nursing home, the rehab — to come join us, you know, with us. But uh, my — my sorority sisters came into the hospital and we had committee meetings, because [laughs] I was on committees. Just like we're coming up there to you.

P4: But it's — so, with me, when I went through mine [cancer], they said, "okey, can we see it? We see it on you? But we see you back in church" I'm like, "Yeah, but I am still hurting and recovering". So, they had to shift to say, "Okay, I got — we've got something else." But by them learning it, they know that I still need support, so they're still there with me and going through the support...so, it's been good.

P2 mentions the inclusion of her sorority members. According to Hamidullah and Riccucci (2017), "Black women were influenced by their cultural heritage and relied on kinship network systems for support. Their support networks include church, book clubs, sororities, extended family, and friends. They attribute this to collectivism values within African American communities, which ultimately assists in the balancing of work and



family demands” (110). While this participant identifies as retired, she includes that she is very active in her sorority, which takes the place of what would be her job. Sororities are not just considered as the average social club within the Black community. It is a lifelong source of support, networking, and commitment to Black women, similar to churches, as shown in the life of P4. She is very involved in church, and at one time, she was doing that and chemotherapy. However, in her described visit she is teaching them how to treat her throughout the whole process, whereas P2 seems to just be handling things as they have always been done.

P2: And I didn’t lose any of my energy, and neither do I lose any of my desires to work — or do things, and I do it before even thinking about it. So much so that I had gotten sick — um, sicker, when I was um – I was doing things, lifting things up, and picking things up...and I had I don’t know how many appointments trying to figure out why my back was hurting. And then it — when they come to find out that I lift—I wasn’t supposed to lift anything high—um heavier than five pounds. So, uh, I didn’t realize how sick I was and that I’m not supposed to do it. So that was the one time I had to regroup, and my son and my daughter said, “Hey, you just stop doing this.”

According to Cramer and Plummer (2009), “intersectionality can be used as a tool for analyzing the help-seeking and help-receiving behavior of people of color with disabilities” (163). Naturally, the strong Black woman ideal is known to be selfless, resilient and independent. Combining both the social construct of disability and intersectionality, there is a deep cycle of oppression that Black disabled women face.

Contrary to white women, because there are different challenges faced, Black women have more oppression to fight through. Therefore, for P2, it is not as if she didn't have any willing helpers—as a strong Black woman it is embedded in you to work and complete tasks; just as she said, "...neither do I lose any of my desires to work or do things, and I do it before even thinking about it."

P4: And you know, black women, we say, "Oh we superwomen," shoot, let me tell you, there's...it's uh the best I could tell you is like going, like a soldier going to war.

P5: Because — I mean, [pause] not that it's scary to mention things, but you never know how people are going to react. Especially with like mental illness, um, just because you are expected to be strong, and perfect, and you either are being punished because of — you are being punished, that's why you have this.

Or like, um, you're just not strong enough, you're not praying enough.

#### EXPECTATION OF HEALING WITH INVISIBLE DISABILITY

Not only in church, but also in society as a whole there is an expectation of complete healing for those with disabilities or those who are ill. People with disabilities have different degrees of impairment: cancer and heart conditions are considered progressive disabilities that cause ever-changing health and life situations. Different degrees of impairment produce different expectations of healing. According to the responses received, expectation of healing relies on the degree of visible impairment. If there is a person who appears to not have any visible hint to disabilities, there is a natural assumption that there is no disability. Something that was consistent amongst the

participants was that their healing was assumed for them—as they began to recover externally, yet still suffering internally—it was assumed that healing was achieved.

P2: I treated myself as if I was completely healed, and I'm not, you know.

P3: If I can say anything to anyone that, um, let's say is around someone that has gone through a major medical, um, um, process, to ask them, you know, is there anything you need or, or how do you feel? You know, don't assume that just because they look—and I'm going to say it like this—just because they look good in the purple suit, they have on that day...it doesn't mean that they are not aching inside. I did have to use a cane for, um, a long period after my um uh accident. People did look at me differently then. Because that was something they could see. And someone who is a good friend of mine said, you know, "You don't need that cane, girl". And I know she was joking, but nobody wants to hear anything like that.

This quote defines the idea of an invisible disability. Individuals with invisible disabilities might not be assumed to be disabled at first meeting. P3 is explaining she does not receive any social stigma due to her disability, but not in a privileged way. Because the social stigma of having a visible disability can be so overt, she is explaining how people don't acknowledge the disability that she possesses at all—until, she showed up to church with a cane. It was at this point when her ability status was acknowledged. Even then, P3 expressed how an individual approached her and said "You don't need that cane, girl." Unfortunately, microaggressions such as this can negatively affect the feeling of acceptance and promote exclusion in different settings. This example is a result of

social stigma. P3 possessed an ever-changing disability where her pain levels fluctuated every day; however, there was expectation of resilience that was present from one Black woman to another. Acquiring disabilities and making a concept of membership to the community is difficult for other marginalized groups to understand. For Black women in particular, the image of the strong Black woman grew as a rebellion to the exploitation of slavery and the American wife ideal. So, difficulties are expected to be endured, not accepted.

P3: And then also I do think that when people saw me, and I looked so well...they were like “Oh, she’s ok.” [laughs] You know, and sometimes without really asking was I okay or not, or did I need something.

P4: I can say church people, you know, they see cancer and “Hey you look good. You’re — you’re healed. God got you through this.” There is times when they really don’t see your disability that’s not physical. It can still be mental, and it’s the physical that you can’t see. And so, that’s a struggle because you have to constantly remind them, I cannot do this! [laughs] Or I can get a little, um, uh, just stressed out because I’m on the medication...and so, they don’t understand the pills hurt because my bones hurt.

Further, P3 explains that her wholeness was assumed because of how she appeared physically. In the previous quote, she made many references to invisible disabilities. She said, “just because they look good in the purple suit, they have on that day...it doesn’t mean that they are not aching inside.” The purple suit symbolizes your best church attire; which says that, I might look good externally, but internally I am in

pain. It is the same situation for P4. Because her disability is invisible, there are so many given assumptions regarding her status of wellbeing. P4's response to her church members is very good for making change within her setting. Unfortunately, the lack of conversation and acknowledgement around invisible disabilities and non-disabled privileges makes social acceptability very hard for those who are not visibly impaired.

## ACCESSIBILITY

According to the Americans with Disabilities Act, religious organizations are exempt from Title III of the ADA, which covers disability discrimination including accessibility. I thought to include this because some of the participants decided on their own to bring up the lack of accessibility within the church; however, there was mention about how the pandemic has helped with services being online. The effort to educate churches on disability inclusion, it is still an ongoing thing.

P1: I think I can still be involved. I think, um, the pandemic has really helped.

Um, my church prior to was not as technology savvy, and so now they're moving to that. And so, now we do have Zoom, and we have, um, the phone...I was able to speak through Zoom, to speak on Lay Witness to talk about how the Lord has delivered me...I'm able to participate, not physically, but through the social technology—social media.

P4: Like right now for AV half of them can't get, uh, technology. They don't understand. They don't have a smartphone. Some don't have an email. Uh, so we got to do just conference call, and that's how they're listening to church service...Yea, and it's funny, we got them all listening now. We got some on

Facebook for the first time...But then—all they got a Facebook for is church.

They don't need no looking for nothing else. There's just church [laughs].

The pandemic has created an opportunity for many churches to increase their efforts in their digital services. P1 was not only able to attend church, but she also participated in service as well. But then you have churches such as the one that P4 attends with an older population of congregants. The opportunity for digital access is limited because of digital knowledge. Many church services are taking this opportunity to stream their services on Facebook and YouTube, but for churches such as the one that P4 attends, there would be limited attendance for established members.

P1: I determine which store I want to visit based upon those who have motorized scooters. And restaurants. And so, when you are spending your money, you want to know who is being in compliance with ADA. And so, uh, I'll just give a shout out to Harris Teeter and to Food Lion, and Walmart—even though Walmart doesn't have as many. And a lot of times it's not charged up.

P4: Like right now my church for example, this is my church, we have like 10 steps. It was 1881 it was built—10—a good 20 steps. Cannot get up there. So, we don't get anybody in a wheelchair. They don't come to church. People that would have come do not come to church. The accessibility is just like a wipeout. And you would think like 2021, that seems like, you know. [laugh]

P1 talked about the places that she supports due to their accessibility. The idea of consumerism is really important when considering the lives of those who are marginalized. We see it happen all the time: when the president or CEO makes a

comment or does something oppressive to a marginalized group, it results in that group not caring to support that given company. This can begin to happen to churches, just as P4 said. She mentioned that they do not get any people to attend service in wheelchairs because there is not a way for them to get up the steps that enter into the church.

Although it is not as prevalent as it should be, accessibility should be very important to the church as an institution. The purpose of the church is to express God's love as one proclaims the Gospel to those who do not believe. Often times, that results in inviting them to church. If the church is not fully accessible for all, that can deter people from coming just as it does in the world of consumerism. Although this can be a potential deterrence, as I mentioned before, the pandemic has created a better opportunity for those who are not able to gain accessibility to physical church building to participate in church online.

The findings present a variety of themes emergent from the data to highlight the richness of qualitative data that reveals the thoughts and feelings of participants and provided me with a more complete knowledge of the social world of Black Christian disabled women. The themes that were identified within the data were redefining wholeness, inspiration through scripture and song, power of resilience in Black female Christians, expectation of healing, and accessibility. I found that as a result of their disability, the participants redefined what wholeness was to them. Although this was the case, these redefining moments expressed themselves differently within the individuals. While some participants focused more on what they cannot do and that they will not be 100 percent again, others acknowledged the journey to achieving physical and spiritual

wholeness while concurrently redefining the idea of self. The participants also find inspiration through scripture and song. While this is expected for Christians in general, a spiritual strengthening happens when one's natural body becomes limited. Because they no longer possess the usual amount of physical strength that they once had, a shift happens where that reliance transfers to God. In addition to these themes, there was also a consistent theme of the resilience that resides in Black women. This is based on the strong Black woman narrative to be independent, strong, and self-accommodating. The expectation of healing was a strong theme as well because of the presence of invisible disabilities. Unfortunately, there is very little discussion regarding disability within Black religious settings, which results in ableist assumptions and microaggressions. The last theme was accessibility. While there was an increase during the pandemic, in terms of streaming and online service, but there is still a need for physical accessibility accommodations.



## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The stories in the New Testament about Jesus's miracles give hope to not only people who identify as disabled, but those who surround them in community as well. The Bible gives account of Jesus healing the blind and paralytic, curing the lepers, a woman with a hemorrhaging issue, and other miracles to give testament to the fact that Jesus heals. Although believed by many Christians that miracles are still performed today, the issue does not reside in the belief of the believer, but the environment of abled bodies that are a part of their congregation—thereby resulting in “exclusion and stigmatization when persons with disabilities try to integrate themselves into mainstream [worship]” (Sande 2019:3). Before I began this investigation into the idea of disability within the Black church, I studied the concept of identity acceptability, and how it relates to physical and spiritual wholeness perspective of the disabled individual. However, once I interviewed my participants, I realized that the expectation of wholeness was not only a factor of the individual, but the environment to which they were apart—in this case, it was the church congregation.

Within my study, I utilized in-depth interviews of the accounts of disabled individual's perception and experiences within their church. The interviews provided a new understanding of how disability affects Black Christians and from them, common themes emerged. While there is an abundance of literature regarding disabled white men and women, there is very little when it comes to the Black Christian community. This

study was conducted to further enlighten the Black Christian community (as well as other communities) about the idea of identity acceptability as it relates to physical and spiritual wholeness.

From this study, I found that there are consistent patterns of redefining wholeness, inspiration through scripture and song, power of resilience in Black female Christians, expectation of healing, and accessibility in the lives of disabled Black women. Not much has been done in the Black church to assimilate the disabled culture better into the congregation of other abled bodies. From the interviews, the only thing that accommodates many of those who cannot get to church service on the weekend are virtual services. While some services may have streamed prior to the pandemic, all of the women that I interviewed only had in-person services prior to COVID-19. As wishful as it is to hope that, as an institution for the gathering of minorities, there would be such a positive response to disabled individuals, there is not. I have found from the interviews that the responsibility is unfortunately left to those who attend the church and identify as disabled. One of the women interviewed explained that she teaches those who she works with in the church how she is to be treated daily as she performs her tasks. She constantly provides a wellness check for them — telling the people on her team how she is that day and tells them what she is willing to do and not do. Another participant explained how when she discloses the cause of her disability, many are able to identify and she shares the resources used to help them.

A shift happened in the minds of these women once they accepted their disabled status. As a result of Black history, there is an internal rebellion against white societal

assimilation. While some parts of society are unavoidable, others can be controlled, such as character traits, organizational membership, and religion. Not only do all of these women attend predominantly Black churches, but also many of them disclosed their involvement in exclusively Black organizations, such as sororities. While literature has mentioned how society could interpret the status of disabled individuals as weak, these women have spoken about empowering others about the strength that is still present. Although some admitted to the lack of ability to do activities that they once were able to do, there is a desire and a drive to teach others about equality in regard to ability. This level of empowerment and drive is an extension of the Black woman archetype, as most of these women remained active in church due to their disabilities. Instead of quitting the tasks all together, many of the women created scenarios that allowed them to remain active and participate in spite of their level of disability.

I believe this empowerment comes from the strength that was already there. Not only are these individuals Black women, possessing two visible traits that oppress them in society, but they also are a part of organizations that were built out of civic duty. For example, some of the denominations that the women were a part of were created because Black people could not congregate with white people at the time of it being founded. Other organizations were created because there were not any Black churches that could be found for miles and miles during the time it was founded. In addition, Black sororities were usually found by Black undergraduate students as ways to provide communal bonds and professional connections for Black individuals. Bottom-line: disabled or not, these women were doing what had to be done. Society has not made it easy for everything to be

at the fingertips for Black people. History shows that we have had to push past disabilities, injuries, illnesses and other debilitating factors that would excuse other non-marginalized individuals. Practices such as this carry on from generation to generation disguised as principles such as “perseverance” or “resilience.” Even the negative images of Black women historically, such as welfare queen, mammy, and Black single mom, are also representations of “taking care of what needs to be done.” There is always a receiving party on the other side, rather than making a decision for one’s self.

Ultimately, it all adds up to what Crenshaw and Collins have spent their research advocating: intersectionality. Society has generalized the representation of organizations, churches, and experiences. However, neither these institutions nor the experiences of white society are archetypal for Black culture. As I have used examples from other systems of oppressions to give a full illustration of how categories interlock to form intersectionality, this study shows how disability as a category, too, intersects with these categories of oppression.

## LIMITATIONS AND STRUGGLES

While this study attempted to explore the perceptions and experiences of wholeness in Black disabled individuals, and the way their lives are shaped in the Black church setting, this study had several limitations.

My sample was small, with only six participants, limited geographically and denominationally, and they were all women—which was not my intent—therefore, it is not generalizable to the population of Black Christians. However, this number speaks to the fact that generally there are more women active in church than men. Gaining

participants for this study was very difficult. Originally, I wanted to study Apostolic/Pentecostal members, but I only received one participant who eventually backed out later that week. I believe that it was hard to gain participants from that denomination because of how “taboo” it is. Because Apostolic/Pentecostals are known to be very legalistic—use the Bible as a literal foundation for all things in their life—to admit to being disabled would be like admitting to a fault or imperfection. The idea of purity, perfection, wholeness, and any other word that suggests a level of “entireness” is very important in their lives. To suggest that they are anything else would admit to a lack of faith or unbelief. As a result, I expanded my pool to all Black Christians.

Likewise, due to issues related to race, disability, and stigma discussed previously, I had to draw participants primarily from my social circle—only one of my participants did not know me at all. I believe the participants were only open to talking to me regarding their disability because they knew me, and they were comfortable. As I could not predict for all of my participants to have a previous relationship with me, I was aware that my insider status as a Black Christian would allow for a place of comfort and connection. Because of this, the participants may have chosen to wear their superwoman cape as a Black strong woman in order to manage their presentation of self and minimize their stigma of a Black disabled woman.

Although the flyer promised confidentiality, and all those other words to show how they would be protected, there is a bit of systemic mistrust with this community. It is more than the status of disability that these women are pushing through. The history of Black people is built on so much oppression and ridicule that it’s hard to trust anyone

outside of our comfort circle. Patricia Hill Collins describes the objectification of Black women as one that places us at a disadvantage, causing us to naturally feel the need to never present our weaker selves. For example, in the last political season Vice President Kamala Harris debated former Vice President Mike Pence and was criticized for her facial expressions, remarks, and all sorts of things that were the same or not even close to the behavior exhibited by her opponent, or any of the other candidates. As much as it would have been in her right to be more assertive, or direct, as a woman of Black and Asian descent, she automatically received way more backlash than the other candidates did because her debate performance was racialized. Not only is there a resistance of the position of Black women outside of their community, but within their community as well. The centrality of the Black church as an institution may come at the expense of many Black women who make up most of the congregation. Although women are known as the “backbone” of the church, that is exactly the intention. Although the background is the desired place for them, women within the institution resist that position.

My goal was to use this as a “first-step” research study, in hopes of gaining a deeper understanding of my participants’ lives so that it could be utilized for future research, as well as to advocate for some positive social change in this area, not to generalize and make sweeping assumptions about the lives of those who identify as Black, Christian, and disabled. In addition, participants may have been influenced by my presence; although, I tried to minimize my position as a researcher and use my position as a part of the in-group to engage my participants.

## REFLEXIVITY

Being an understudied topic and intersection, my insider status as a Black Christian woman not only allowed me to create a familiar space for the women to speak freely regarding such a vulnerable section of their lives, but it also created a place where they were understood spiritually as well. I was able to create a more in-depth exploration in regard to their references as it pertained to scripture and songs. As a believer, sometimes it is hard to be fully expressive in a non-spiritual setting out of fear of being an offense to others, or just being the odd one out. While often times, being a believer comes with an unapologetic boldness, if you are unsure of the faith of the other party, it can serve as pointless to be expressive.

As a Black spiritual woman, who also identifies as an academic, I was very empathetic to the women. Although I do not know what it is like to be disabled, I was able to understand how difficult it was to express your stance spiritually in an academic space. I enjoyed interviewing the different women regarding their experiences within church; however, I found it difficult to find the balance of my spiritual self and academic self while trying to properly express the voices of my participants in the analysis of the data.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Future research should intentionally investigate the ideologies and experience regarding wholeness and identity in Black disabled individuals from different denominations. Usually within Black Christian research that assesses denominational differences, the same types of churches are used: AME, AME Zion, Christian Methodist

Episcopal, Church of God in Christ, Baptist, Apostolic/Pentecostal, and Non-Denominational. While they all identify as Christian, there are severe differences in the beliefs of each one that can shape their ideologies regarding wholeness.

In addition to these recommendations for future research, the pandemic has created a new opportunity for those who may have struggled with in-person accessibility to church services possible. During the interviews, those that mentioned the pandemic spoke about the positive role it played in virtual service accessibility. The pandemic has shown how necessary and beneficial virtual services are to the church—from streamed services to Zoom meetings. The participants also mentioned how physical church buildings lack accessibility. Although the idea of virtual meeting spaces and streamed events have been introduced to the world, it would still be beneficial for the physical buildings of churches to gain better accessibility.

Lastly, Crenshaw's intersectionality plays such a large role in the lives of Black disabled Christian women. Not only do they struggle to have their voice heard as a Black woman, but as a disabled individual as well. An existing stigma amongst Black women regarding their strength and assertiveness causes Black women to operate within the cultural expectations of society. For example, Black women, regardless of the resources at hand or their ability, have to work much harder to achieve standard expectations. Unfortunately, this results in the desire to prove, taking away one's ability to operate in liberty and make decisions based on one's own expectations rather than their local community's or society's expectation.



I can only hope that my interviews with the participants have any real lasting impact in their lives as Black Christian disabled women or will lead to any positive changes within their local church. However, I am sure that the research process itself was refreshing for many of my participants in terms of having their voices heard and helping them feel less alone. While I hope that my study will be utilized as a way to better support all disabled individuals, I am committed to continuing to share my story and the stories of my participants in hopes of changing the ways in which the Black church sees disabled individuals.

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