EMPOWERING THE MARGINS: EXPLORING CHURCH PLANTING AND SUSTAINABILITY BY SOCIOECONOMICALLY DISENFRANCHISED BLACK COMMUNITIES IN MAJORITY-WHITE MAINLINE DENOMINATIONS

By Oghene'tega Violet Ogbon (Swann)

A DOCTORAL PAPER
SUBMITTED TO THE PITTSBURGH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
2026

Dedication

This work is dedicated to: my daughter, Princess Pearl, whose love and sacrifice permeate my scholarship and ministry; the family of Chief Alice O. Ogbon and His Royal Majesty Ogbon Oghoro Ogoni I, the Owhorode of Olomu Kingdom, Nigeria; the people of Aliquippa, who let me call their city home for the past two decades; and the families who trusted me with their children, who became the foundational community of Refreshing Springs Ministry.

Preface

This dissertation emerged from years of wrestling with a recurring tension between the lived realities of ministry in marginalized communities and the institutional frameworks often used to evaluate, support, and understand churches within those communities. Long before this research formally began, I found myself repeatedly encountering forms of congregational life that demonstrated resilience, relational depth, spiritual commitment, and meaningful community impact, yet were often dismissed, overlooked, or rendered unintelligible within dominant church-growth and institutional paradigms.

These tensions became particularly visible through my ministry experience in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, a socioeconomically struggling post-industrial community marked both by systemic challenges and by strong networks of relational belonging. As founder of Refreshing Springs Ministry and as the first Black clergy member within Beaver-Butler Presbytery, I occupied a space that frequently required navigating multiple forms of institutional, cultural, and ecclesial dislocation simultaneously. Over time, I became increasingly aware that many of the assumptions shaping conversations around church planting, sustainability, leadership, and ecclesial legitimacy did not adequately account for the realities of ministry emerging within economically and socially marginalized contexts. What I encountered in Aliquippa often stood in contrast to the narratives surrounding it. Communities frequently described through the language of decline nevertheless sustained powerful forms of care, interdependence, hospitality, continuity, and spiritual resilience. Congregations with limited institutional resources continued to function as stabilizing relational ecosystems within their neighborhoods.

Ministry frequently operated through networks of trust, presence, shared struggle, and communal memory rather than through the formal organizational structures often emphasized within dominant church-growth models. Yet many of these realities remained difficult to articulate within prevailing evaluative frameworks.

As these tensions deepened, so too did my questions. Why did certain expressions of congregational life remain largely absent from broader theological and institutional conversations about church vitality and sustainability? Why were some forms of ministry more easily recognized as legitimate, strategic, or successful than others? What forms of theological imagination were necessary in order to recognize churches in marginalized social and economic contexts not as deficient expressions of ministry, but as legitimate sites of ecclesial wisdom, resilience, and innovation?

This research emerged from those questions. It also emerged from a growing conviction that communities often described primarily through deficiency possess important theological, organizational, and communal insights capable of broadening contemporary understandings of church, mission, leadership formation and sustainability. The congregations and leaders who participated in this study demonstrated that ministry within marginalized contexts cannot be understood solely through institutional metrics or dominant ecclesial assumptions. Their experiences instead revealed forms of resilience and ecclesial creativity rooted deeply in relationships, communal presence, adaptability, and shared responsibility.

This dissertation therefore represents more than an academic inquiry. It reflects an effort to listen carefully to communities whose stories are often underrepresented within broader conversations about ministry and church development. It also reflects my hope

that practical theology and ecclesiology might continue expanding toward more attentive, contextually grounded, and relationally aware understandings of what it means to be church within diverse social realities.

The chapters that follow explore these questions through qualitative multiple-case study research centered on two congregations serving marginalized communities in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania. Together, their stories invite a broader reconsideration of how ministry, leadership, sustainability, and ecclesial legitimacy are defined, recognized, and practiced within contemporary church life.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the many individuals and communities who made the journey of this research possible. The first is my daughter, HRH Princess Pearl. On the first day of my Doctor of Ministry program, I found myself once again occupying a familiar but exhausting space—the only Black person in the room, carrying both my own voice and the weight of perspectives too often absent from theological and institutional conversations about ministry, church, and community. The moment awakened a familiar exhaustion shaped by years of navigating ministry and institutional spaces as both an outsider and representative of perspectives often absent from broader theological conversations. Sitting in that classroom that day, the only Black person in our small group, the weight of that reality suddenly felt overwhelming. Despite how hard I had fought to be in the program, thirty minutes into the first class, I texted my daughter and told her that I did not think I could stay and continue with it. At the time, my daughter who was only fourteen years old texted back immediately: “Mom, you cannot leave. I understand how you feel, but even if you are the only Black person there, perhaps you are meant to be there so others can hear the voices you represent.” That brief

response changed everything: it redirected my gaze, clarified my purpose, and strengthened my backbone. The encouragement of that fourteen-year-old child became the quiet but steady foundation beneath the years of work, struggle, and perseverance that followed. Princess Pearl, thank you for being present in my life in ways that continually make the impossible possible. I am grateful that you and God chose me to be your mother. Thank you for choosing to be my daughter. I am honored to be your mother.

Next, I acknowledge my parents, His Royal Majesty Ogbon Ogoni I, the Owhorode of Olomu Kingdom, Nigeria, and my mother, Chief Alice O. Ogbon, both of whom passed away within two months of one another near the completion of this doctoral journey. Their passing was deeply painful, particularly because this season marked what felt like the culminating chapter of a calling I first sensed at fourteen years old—to become a pastor. That call was difficult for my devout Nigerian Anglican family to understand at the time, as women priests did not exist within the Anglican tradition in Nigeria. Yet my mother, even while wrestling to understand the path before me, chose to stand with me. She never once doubted my call and spiritual inclinations but always supported them. Until her transition to eternity, her affirmation of my call demonstrated that one does not need complete understanding in order to recognize truth. My father also came to that place near the end of his life. So much so that one of our final conversations was spent discussing ways he might use his influence as a royal canon to begin opening conversations about the ordination of women within the Anglican Church of Nigeria. That conversation, full of hope and possibility, was abruptly shelved because two months later, he joined my mother in eternity. I remain deeply grateful for the love, courage, and

faith that both of my parents embodied throughout their lives and which they channeled in many ways into raising our family. Those efforts resulted in who I am and what I do.

I wish also to express deep gratitude to the people of Aliquippa, Pennsylvania. From the moment I stepped into the community in response to God's call, I sensed that Aliquippa carried a story that deserved to be told—even when few outside the community were listening. The early mornings in that city, with the sun rising over the city, often felt like a quiet proclamation of God's glory over a community that many had long dismissed. Yet within Aliquippa, I encountered strong bonds of relationship and resilience that resisted the narratives of decline often imposed upon it. The community reminded me deeply of the African concept of village, where people know one another across generations and where belonging carries memory, responsibility, and care. It has been an honor and privilege to call Aliquippa home.

I am grateful to the members of Refreshing Springs Ministry who trusted me with their children and partnered in shaping spaces of safety, growth, and belonging within the community. Watching those young people grow into thoughtful and capable adults has been one of the great joys of my ministry. I remain proud of the people you have become and look forward to the continued ways you will be light wherever your paths lead.

I also acknowledge The Reverend Alan Adams, the Executive Presbyter under whose leadership Refreshing Springs Ministry and I became members of Beaver-Butler Presbytery and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). His courageous faith, thoughtful willingness to take risks, and commitment to principled neutrality made it possible for that transition to occur once again in a context where I became the first and only Black

clergy person and where Refreshing Springs Ministry stood as the only Black congregation in a predominantly white space.

My gratitude extends to the congregations that participated in this research: Sound the Alarm Ministries and Deliverance Temple Church of God in Christ, and their leaders Reverend Rick Shymoniak, Reverend Vera Shymoniak, and Bishop Marvin Moreland. Thank you for trusting me enough with your stories and granting me space to witness firsthand your courageous blend of faith, love, and service towards the people of Aliquippa. Your graciousness and hospitality made this research possible.

I could not have completed this Doctor of Ministry program without the guidance of my advisor, Dr. Scott Hagley. Dr. Hagley's role as an academic supervisor during the challenges that arose throughout this journey opened a new understanding for me: that of the academic supervisor as a spiritual midwife. In seasons when the circumstances surrounding this work threatened my ability to continue, he remained beside me with the steady presence of a midwife—never judging, never condemning, never pushing me beyond what I could bear, yet always encouraging me to continue forward in whatever strength I had. I attribute the successful completion of this program and dissertation in large part to his faithful accompaniment during moments of struggle. For that, I offer my deepest gratitude.

I am also grateful to The Reverend Dr. Edwin van Driel, whose theological work significantly strengthened my conviction about the necessity of this dissertation early on in my Doctor of Ministry program, and which provided a strong theological framework upon which to start my argument. His thoughtful exploration of what it means to be church and his openness to forms of ecclesial life that extend beyond traditional

institutional models, deepened my conviction that this research was both necessary and faithful to the work to which I have been called.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the many individuals and communities who supported this journey in ways both visible and unseen, especially Pittsburgh Theological Seminary's Doctor of Ministry Associate Director, Ramona Spencer, who convinced me to enroll in the Missional Leadership cohort instead of the one I initially considered. Ramona's intuitive attentiveness nurtured my presence and continuity in the Doctor of Ministry program. Her ability to sense and respond to unspoken needs sustained me in the early days of the program when all I could bring was my presence but no financial resources to sustain it. Her spiritual labor of behind-the-scenes advocacy opened spaces of refuge for me at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and strengthened my blossoming commitment to the program. Pittsburgh Theological Seminary responded to both my unspoken and spoken needs with many acts of generosity and hospitality, including providing accommodation when I needed space away from my regular community to focus on writing and research. The generosity and hospitality extended by Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and the Doctor of Ministry program leadership and staff who walked alongside me during this process became, at critical moments, a refuge that enabled this work to continue when I did not have the strength to continue on my own.

I am also deeply grateful to the congregations, clergy, and friends whose financial contributions, encouragement, and visible support made it possible for me to move through different stages of this program: I thank the partnering individuals and churches of Beaver-Butler Presbytery under the leadership of Rev. Alan Adams; I thank the New Worshipping Communities Initiatives of the Presbyterian Church (USA) for

providing a pathway for Beaver-Butler Presbytery, myself and Refreshing Springs to envision partnership; I thank the Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly Committee on Representation (GACOR) for giving me the opportunity to serve and thereby, help identify and advocate for the inclusion of various under-represented demographics in the PCUSA; I thank the Synod of the Trinity for their various financial support for myself and Refreshing Springs programs between 2017-2018; I thank Shadyside Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania for their amazing scholarship support; I thank the Aliquippa Vicinity & United Ministries ministerium for their many years of visible clergy support through including me in their annual programs; I thank Bishop Bernard Wallace of Church in the Round, Church of God in Christ, Aliquippa, Pennsylvania. His confidence in and support of my call were evident from the very beginning when he welcomed me into his ministry by introducing me to his congregation and encouraging them to partner with me. Church in the Round has become my "home church," a place where I can simply go to feel at home.

This work is the result of many lives intersecting across communities, ministries, and moments of encouragement that often came exactly when they were needed most. While a single name appears on the cover of this dissertation, its pages carry the imprint of many voices, relationships, and acts of generosity and hospitality that made the journey possible. I remain deeply grateful for the privilege of walking alongside so many people whose faith, courage, and commitment to community continue to illuminate what it means to be *church* in the world.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Abstract

This qualitative multiple-case study examines how two Black congregations in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania establish and sustain ecclesial life within socioeconomically marginalized contexts shaped by racial inequity, economic disenfranchisement, and uneven institutional support. Drawing on interviews, congregational narratives, theological reflection, and ecclesiological analysis, the study explores patterns of sustainability, leadership, legitimacy, and mission. Findings reveal that congregational vitality in marginalized communities often emerges through relational trust, communal presence, adaptability, grassroots leadership, and spiritual commitment rather than dominant institutional metrics. The study contributes to practical theology and ecclesiology by offering a relational and contextually grounded understanding of church, mission, and sustainability.

Chapter 1: Ministry on the Margins: Theological and Contextual Foundations

Context and Significance of the Study

Church-planting remains one of the primary avenues through which the church engages God's mission in a changing cultural landscape. Yet the practices, sustainability, and success metrics of church-planting are often framed by dominant research and ecclesial paradigms rooted in affluent, male, and majority-white contexts. Dominant church-planting paradigms in the United States have been significantly shaped by models that prioritize rapid growth, suburban expansion, and resource-intensive ministry structures. The dominant paradigms in church-planting literature and practice include the *Purpose-Driven* model (Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in Orange County, California), the *Seeker-Sensitive/Attractional* model (Bill Hybels' Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago), the *Homogeneous Unit Principle* (Donald McGavran's Church Growth Movement), and the larger *Attractional Megachurch* movement[1]. Research indicates that a substantial proportion of megachurches are located in suburban contexts, reflecting broader demographic and economic patterns that favor areas with higher income levels and population stability.[2] These models often assume access to considerable financial, human, and institutional capital, including large-scale facilities, paid staff, and sustained external funding. As Stetzer and Bird observe,

---

[1] Eileen Luhr, "Megachurches, Suburbia and the Prosperity Gospel," *Utne Reader*, August 2015; see also Marc von der Ruhr and Joseph P. Daniels, "A Model of Religious Investment to Explain the Success of 'Megachurches'" (working paper, May 2008), accessed January 8, 2026, https://www.academia.edu/54632248/A_Model_of_Religious_Investment_to_Explain_the_Success_of_Megachurches

[2] Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird, Viral Churches: Helping Church Planters Become Movement Makers (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

contemporary church-planting strategies frequently emphasize scalability and reproducibility, yet these assumptions may not translate effectively into economically marginalized or historically under-resourced communities.[3,4] Consequently, such paradigms risk privileging contexts where financial sustainability is more readily attainable while marginalizing communities whose ministry ecosystems operate under fundamentally different conditions. The Homogeneous Unit Principle, foundational to the church growth movement, operates on the assumption that "people like to become Christian without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers,"[5] a principle that, while sociologically observational, has been applied in ways that reinforce racial and class segregation in church-planting contexts. Furthermore, the educational and scholarly ecosystems that have helped shape dominant church-planting paradigms have often centered affluent, suburban, and predominantly white assumptions about who plants churches and what successful church-planting looks like, leaving marginalized communities comparatively underrepresented in the narratives and models most widely circulated.[6]

---

[3] Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird, "The State of Church Planting in the United States: Research Overview and Qualitative Study of Primary Church Planting Entities," *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 19, no. 2 (2008): 9–10; see also Joel Owens Rainey, "A Comparison of the Effectiveness of Selected Church Planting Models Measured by Conversion Growth and New Church Starts" (EdD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005).

[4] Hartford Institute for Religion Research, "Megachurch Research," accessed April 6, 2026, https://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/.

[5] Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growt*h, updated ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980)..

[6] Len Tang, "Church Plants as Evangelism Laboratories," *Fuller Studio*, accessed January 24, 2026, https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/theology/church-plants-as-evangelism-laboratories/

Structural Limits of Dominant Church-Planting Paradigms

In contrast, emerging alternative approaches such as missional/incarnational models (Ed Stetzer, Alan Hirsch, Mike Breen)[7], prophetic church-planting emphasizing justice and spiritual power encounters (Eldin Villafañe), indigenous and self-supporting models, and the long-standing practices of Black churches in marginalized communities offer different theological and methodological frameworks that have been underrepresented in dominant church-planting literature. Fuller Seminary's Church Planting Initiative Director, Len Tang, in his article on "Church Plants as Evangelism Laboratories" noted that "There are many churches planted by and for Blacks, Latinos, and Asians in the US, and one of the realities is that many of those churches fly under the radar because they function quite autonomously, are often small, and are not necessarily part of established denominational structures that track and report results."[8] His article directly addresses and critiques the "white success story model," discusses colonial approaches in church-planting, gentrification concerns, and the dominance of the male, wealthy, suburban church planter stereotype within Fuller Seminary's own institutional context. His observation, together with my own experience of seminary church-planting training, supports the central concern of this research: significant gaps remain in church-planting training, theology, ecclesiology, and narrative framing.

In the multitude of resources that support affluent, male and white models of church-planting, what remains underexplored and under-theorized is how historically

---

[7] Ed Stetzer, Planting Missional Churches, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016); Alan Hirsch and Mike Breen, The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009); Eldin Villafañe, Seek the Peace of the City: Reflections on Urban Ministry (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

[8] Len Tang, "Church Plants as Evangelism Laboratories," Fuller Studio, accessed January 24, 2026, https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/theology/church-plants-as-evangelism-laboratories/

disenfranchised communities of color—particularly Black congregations in majority-white mainline denominations[9]—navigate the challenges and opportunities of church-planting without access to comparable socioeconomic resources. Lifeway Research has documented that many African American church planters operate with limited financial backing, often relying on bivocational leadership models and personal resources to sustain ministry efforts.[10] This reality exposes a structural tension between denominational expectations for self-sustainability and the economic constraints faced by congregations situated within marginalized communities. As external funding diminishes over time, the burden of sustaining ministry increasingly shifts onto congregations that may lack the financial base required to meet institutional benchmarks of viability. The result is not merely a financial challenge but a broader question regarding how sustainability itself is defined, measured, and applied across diverse ecclesial contexts shaped by uneven institutional support [11] and relational networks. Standard denominational funding models assume a three- to five-year timeline to self-sufficiency, with church planters expected to raise substantial portions of their salary through established personal networks and connections to potential donors. These models implicitly assume middle-class and upper-middle-class resources: personal savings or family financial support, educational debt that can be managed, access to affluent networks capable of significant giving commitments, and the social capital that accrues

---

[9] Kathleen Garces-Foley, "Multiethnic Congregations," Institute for Faith and Learning, Baylor University, 2022.

[10] "LifeWay Research Studies African-American Church Plants," LifeWay News, September 2, 2013; see also "African-American Church Planting: Research Report" (LifeWay Research, 2019).

[11] LifeWay Research, African-American Church Planting Research Report: For Presbyterian Church in America—MNA (2012), 13, 15, accessed January 14, 2026, https://2019.pcamna.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2013/08/African-American-Church-Planting-Final-Report-PCA-MNA.pdf

from established professional and ecclesiastical relationships.[12] For church planters from marginalized communities of color who often lack these inherited networks and financial cushions, the expectation that a church plant will become self-sustaining on modest giving (approximately $7-10 per person per week in low-income urban contexts) within this compressed timeline creates an untenable financial situation. The result is that historically marginalized church planters must navigate not only the missiological and theological challenges of planting churches in their communities but also institutional structures more suitable for those with access to middle-class resources and networks—a reality that has contributed to higher failure rates and reliance on sporadic denominational interventions rather than systematic, resourced partnership.

Within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), initiatives such as the 1001 New Worshiping Communities movement have sought to cultivate innovative forms of ministry; however, these efforts are often accompanied by funding models that assume eventual financial independence within a defined timeframe.[13] The Growth Grant Application for New Worshiping Communities of the Presbyterian Church (USA) details the standard grant structure: Seed Grant ($10,000), Investment Grant ($30,000), and Growth Grant ($30,000)—totaling $70,000 in denominational support over 3.5 years, requiring dollar-for-dollar matching funds from presbytery and/or partner congregations. The matching requirement itself assumes access to affluent partner congregations and prosperous presbyteries.[14] Whilst the Mission Grant of the Presbyterian Church (USA)

---

[12] "Church Planter Compensation Package Formation Guidelines," Presbyterian Church in America Missions to North America, February 18, 2010

[13] Presbyterian Mission Agency, "New Worshiping Communities Funding and Support," Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), accessed April 6, 2026, https://www.pcusa.org/.

[14] Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Office of Mission Program Grants, "Growth Grant Application for New Worshiping Communities," rev. January 2025, https://pcusa.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/Growth%20Grant%20Application%20rev.%20January%202025%5B11%5D.pdf

confirms that "Investment and Growth Grants ordinarily require a dollar-for-dollar match provided by the combined contributions of the partner congregation and presbytery and/or synod,"[15] the matching requirement (dollar-for-dollar match required for Investment and Growth Grants) assumes church planters have access to established, resourced congregations willing to provide financial support—a reality that reflects institutional networks more readily available to planters from majority-white denominations with longer institutional histories in affluent communities. While such frameworks are intended to encourage stewardship and long-term viability, they may inadvertently impose uniform expectations on congregations operating in vastly different socio-economic environments. Funding structures that require matching contributions or demonstrate trajectories toward self-sufficiency can place disproportionate pressure on communities with limited economic resources. As such, institutional definitions of sustainability may function less as neutral benchmarks and more as mechanisms that shape which ministries are deemed viable, thereby raising critical questions about equity, access, and the distribution of denominational support.

At the same time, emerging denominational initiatives signal an awareness of historical and systemic inequities that have shaped congregational life. For example, the Presbytery of Baltimore's Matthew 25 Reparations Fund represents an effort to address the long-term impact of racial and economic injustice within the church's structures.[16] Such initiatives acknowledge that disparities in wealth, access, and institutional support

---

[15] Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Mission Program Grants, "Guidelines & Application Instructions for New Worshiping Communities Grants (NWCs)," *CenterNet,* accessed January 24, 2026, https://centernet.pcusa.org/ministries/1001-2/mission-program-grants/.

[16] Presbytery of Baltimore, "Matthew 25 Reparations Fund," accessed January 24, 2026, https://www.baltimorepresbytery.org/.

are not incidental but are rooted in broader historical patterns. Yet the coexistence of reparative efforts alongside standard funding expectations highlights an ongoing tension within denominational systems: the recognition of inequity on the one hand, and the continued reliance on uniform sustainability metrics on the other. This tension underscores the need for deeper examination of how institutional practices align—or fail to align—with commitments to justice and equity.

The Critical Gap Addressed By This Study

The above challenges are further intensified within African American church-planting contexts, where historical inequities intersect with contemporary funding structures. The tension between traditional denominational models and the grassroots realities of marginalized church plants offers a prophetic locus for discerning God's mission in marginalized contexts. It is within this critical gap that this study seeks to contribute, offering both theological and practical insights to affirm and strengthen church-planting by disenfranchised Black communities.

This research arises from the lived experience of the author, Oghene'tega Violet Ogbon (Swann), founder of Refreshing Springs Ministry, a church plant in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania. Both the author and congregation became members of the Presbyterian

Church (USA) through Beaver-Butler Presbytery in 2017[17,18] and 2018[19,20,21,22] respectively. While this study is informed by the author's lived experience as the founder of Refreshing Springs Ministry, the primary data analyzed in this research is drawn from two independent congregations. The author's experience therefore functions as a contextual and interpretive lens rather than as the central data set of the study.

Aliquippa as Contextual Ground

Aliquippa, Pennsylvania is a small city along the Ohio River whose present realities bear the marks of a long and painful history of industrial expansion, collapse, and uneven attempts at renewal.[23] Once home to the massive Jones & Laughlin steelworks complex that employed thousands of workers and anchored the local economy, Aliquippa's population has declined from a mid-twentieth-century peak of more than 27,000 residents to just over 9,000 in recent years.[24] Even as nearby metropolitan Pittsburgh has enjoyed a partial "eds and meds" and technology-driven

---

[17] Beaver-Butler Presbytery, Pre-Mail Packet for March 28, 2017 Presbytery Meeting, March 28, 2017, noting presbytery approval for a commission to install Rev. Tega Swann as Designated Pastor of Refreshing Springs Ministry, with the service planned for April 22, 2017, at Ambridge U.P. Church.
[18] Beaver-Butler Presbytery, Pre-Mail for May 23, 2017 Presbytery Meeting, May 17, 2017, reporting the installation of Rev. Tega Swann as pastor of Refreshing Springs Ministry on April 22, 2017, at Ambridge U.P. Church, conducted by Rev. Tom Harmon.
[19] Beaver-Butler Presbytery, Pre-Mail for September 25, 2018 Presbytery Meeting, September 25, 2018, 34, listing the "Organizing Covenant of Refreshing Springs Church" (item E).
[20] Beaver-Butler Presbytery, Pre-Mail for September 25, 2018 Presbytery Meeting, September 25, 2018, 31, recording the approved motion to organize and register Refreshing Springs Church as a congregation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).
[21] Beaver-Butler Presbytery, Pre-Mail for September 25, 2018 Presbytery Meeting, September 25, 2018, 38, reporting the registration of Refreshing Springs Church as a congregation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (item 17).
[22] Beaver-Butler Presbytery, Pre-Mail for September 25, 2018 Presbytery Meeting, September 25, 2018, listing the "Ordination and Installation of Newly Elected Ruling Elders—Refreshing Springs Church" in the order of the meeting.
[23] U.S. Census Bureau, "QuickFacts: Aliquippa City, Pennsylvania," accessed January 11, 2026, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/aliquippacitypennsylvania.
[24] Ibid.

resurgence,[25] Aliquippa has remained emblematic of the persistent socioeconomic fragility of many deindustrialized towns in the broader region.[26] Contemporary demographic and economic data underscore the depth of this fragility. Recent estimates place Aliquippa's population around 9,100–9,200 residents, with a racial composition of roughly 56 percent white and 37 percent Black, in a city whose median household income hovers near $51,000 but whose poverty rate approaches one in five residents (according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Aliquippa experiences significantly lower median household income levels and higher rates of poverty compared to national averages).[27] Unemployment in Aliquippa and Beaver County has repeatedly outpaced state and national averages, and studies of Western Pennsylvania's deindustrialized communities note that large-scale industrial investments have not reversed long-term patterns of employment and population decline.[28] The result is a community marked by multigenerational poverty, racial stratification, limited economic opportunity, and a profound sense of both resilience and exhaustion. These economic realities shape not only the lived experiences of residents but also the capacity of local congregations to generate financial resources internally.

---

[25] Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, “Rust and Renewal: A Pittsburgh Retrospective,” accessed January 11, 2026, https://www.clevelandfed.org/regional-analysis/pittsburgh-retrospective.
[26] Data USA, "Aliquippa, PA," accessed January 11, 2026, https://datausa.io/profile/geo/aliquippa-pa.
[27] U.S. Census Bureau, "QuickFacts: Aliquippa city, Pennsylvania," accessed January 11, 2026, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/aliquippacitypennsylvania.
[28] Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, *Deindustrialized Communities Market Study*: *Final Report,* accessed January 11, 2026; “Beaver County Population, Employment Decline Despite Taxpayer Investment in Shell Cracker,” *The Allegheny Front,* February 13, 2025, accessed January 11, 2026, https://www.alleghenyfront.org/beaver-county-population-employment-decline-shell-ethane-cracker/.

Theological Reinforcement

The socio-economic context of Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, further illustrates the challenges associated with sustaining ministry in marginalized environments. In such contexts, traditional models of church sustainability—particularly those predicated on consistent giving and financial growth—may prove inadequate or misaligned with the community's realities. As a result, sustainability must be understood not solely in financial terms but in relation to the broader social, economic, and communal conditions within which ministry takes place. In this context, the formation and sustenance of worshiping communities is not a marginal concern but a central dimension of how residents make sense of God, neighbor, and self amid systemic abandonment.

This tension also invites theological reflection on the nature of God's mission as it emerges within marginalized contexts. As Jennings argues, Christian theology must grapple with the ways in which social and racial formations have shaped ecclesial imagination and practice.[29] Similarly, Newbigin emphasizes that the church's mission is not confined to contexts of stability or privilege but is fundamentally oriented toward participation in God's work within the world as it is.[30] Together, these perspectives suggest that sustainability cannot be reduced to institutional viability alone but must be understood in light of the church's calling to embody faithful presence across diverse and often challenging contexts. Church-planting in Aliquippa does not occur on a neutral field of abundant resources and institutional stability; it unfolds amid shuttered factories, constrained public budgets, and neighborhoods where economic and racial vulnerabilities

---

[29] Willie James Jennings, The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).
[30] Lesslie Newbigin, The Gospel in a Pluralist Society (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

overlap. This study emerges from within that landscape and focuses particularly on how socioeconomically disenfranchised Black communities in Aliquippa have planted and sustained congregations in ways that challenge dominant ecclesial and missional paradigms.

The Author's Missional Journey & Statement of the Problem

This research arises from my lived experience as a Black Nigerian American immigrant, clergywoman, single mother, and independent church planter whose ministry journey spans continents, traditions, and socioeconomic contexts. My path to ordained ministry, church-planting, and eventual membership in the Presbyterian Church (USA) was not the result of personal inclination but rather of discernment undertaken with numerous companions across two continents, various states, and diverse communities in the United States.

I was raised in a staunchly Anglican church family, with both parents serving as active church leaders. My father, until his passing in 2023, served as a Royal Canon of the Anglican Church—one of only two such positions globally at that time, the other held by Queen Elizabeth II. As a teenager, I expanded my spiritual formation by participating in Pentecostal worship traditions, where I received ordination training and completed a three-year church-planting internship. In December 2001, Bishop Ayo Odunayo, Overseer of The Churches of Victory International (Nigeria), traveled to the United States to perform my ordination. Following this, I was released into independent church-planting, a practice within Pentecostal tradition for those called to plant churches.

My next three years were spent serving as an Associate Minister with other church plants while discerning the nature and scope of my own calling. In June 2004, I

launched Refreshing Springs Ministry in Maryland as a non-denominational worshiping community serving middle- and upper-class African immigrants in the Maryland-DC-Virginia region. Though the ministry flourished, I sensed a temporary quality to this call and spent a year in prayer discerning my permanent calling and location. Through what I understand as miraculous divine guidance, I was directed to Aliquippa, Pennsylvania. I closed on and moved into my Aliquippa home in March 2007 to begin a permanent call to place-based ministry. What followed was six months of prayer and listening, culminating in November 2007 when circumstances aligned for me to begin acquiring the Davis Street properties for Refreshing Springs' permanent residence. The final property acquisition was completed in July 2011. Between March 2007 and December 2008, I spent time discerning what kind of ministry Refreshing Springs was called to provide to Aliquippa's residents and region. In March 2009, Refreshing Springs, Aliquippa, PA, was launched as a children- and youth-centered, Pennsylvania-incorporated church plant.

From 2009 to 2016, and through intentional local partnerships with businesses, schools, governmental and non-governmental organizations, Refreshing Springs successfully provided holistic ministry to families with children ages 3–18, offering weekly religious education, monthly educational field trips during the school year, and weekly Vacation Bible School, summer camps, and summer lunch programs during summer months. During this period, I also served on various government and ecumenical boards, providing leadership for county and community projects that contributed to the development and wellbeing of the broader community.

The Paradox of Institutional Inclusion

Despite this widespread success in ministry, my position as an independent church planter, Black clergywoman, single mother, and African immigrant cast me as a permanent outsider within Aliquippa's tight-knit, conservative community. After eight years of residency and six years of active and successful ministry, the isolation became unbearable and I seriously considered reclaiming community for myself and my daughter by relocating to Maryland and commuting to Aliquippa on weekends to maintain the church's programs. But before making this momentous decision, prayer partners in Nigeria and the United States undertook several months of intercession to discern God's will for my situation. Remarkably, both prayer groups reported the same divine direction: stay in Aliquippa. Unwilling to continue without community support, I placed a fleece before God, asking for tangible evidence of divine guidance through the provision of community for my daughter and myself. Within two to three months of making this prayer, circumstances began to unfold that, three to four years later, culminated in my ordination and Refreshing Springs' incorporation into the Presbyterian Church (USA).

In April 2017, I became the first Black clergy in Beaver-Butler Presbytery and in July 2018, Refreshing Springs became the first Black congregation, Refreshing Springs Mission Church in that same presbytery.[31] This historic inclusion occurred largely because the presbytery's leadership at that time actively pursued partnership, affirmed the congregation's vitality, and unanimously supported both my ordination and Refreshing Springs' organization—precisely because of the church's proven effectiveness in a

[31] "Beaver-Butler Presbytery Will Always Be Part of Adams' Family," Synod of the Trinity, September 14, 2018, https://www.syntrinity.org/featured/beaver-butler-presbytery-will-always-be-part-of-adams-family/

socioeconomically disenfranchised context. However, this institutional inclusion revealed a darker underside within months. In the Fall of 2018, new leadership took over the presbytery, and within one month, the institutional landscape shifted dramatically. From November 2019 through July 2020,[32] presbytery leaders initiated a series of actions—unknown to the congregation and its leadership[33,34] —aimed at dismantling Refreshing Springs as a PC(USA) congregation.[35,36] These actions eventually led to the departure of the congregation's majority and my resignation from the denomination in October 2021.

This dismantling was particularly troubling because it occurred despite national denominational commitments to church-planting and demographic diversification.[37] Beaver-Butler Presbytery and other PC(USA) higher councils justified their actions by citing Refreshing Springs' low socioeconomic status.[38] The documentary record surrounding Refreshing Springs Mission Church reveals a sustained pattern of institutional tension in which discernment about mission and sustainability was never merely theological or practical, but also organizationally mediated and contested. Early materials frame the proposed sale of the Davis Street property decision as the outcome of

---

[32] Beaver-Butler Presbytery, Presbytery Meeting Packet, September 24, 2019, 39, 53.
[33] Beaver-Butler Presbytery, Pre-Mail for November 19, 2019 Presbytery Meeting, November 19, 2019, 13, item 17b.
[34] Beaver-Butler Presbytery, Presbytery Zoom Meeting Packet, March 24, 2020, 4, item D (Rev. Tega Swann; Refreshing Springs; Davis Street), 6 item 4, 11.
[35] Beaver-Butler Presbytery, Coordinating Team Minutes, May 6, 2020 (reported in July 28, 2020 Presbytery materials), discussion of Refreshing Springs Mission Church sustainability and proposed redirection of ministry.
[36] Beaver-Butler Presbytery, Minutes of the Presbytery Meeting, September 22, 2020, discussion of Refreshing Springs Mission Church, including remarks and objections raised by Rev. Tega Swann and members of the congregation.
[37] Paul Seebeck, "Twenty-one New Worshiping Communities, Two Presbyteries Receive Mission Program Grants," Presbyterian Mission Agency, October 26, 2020, under "Refreshing Springs Ministry," https://centernet.pcusa.org/story/twenty-one-new-worshiping-communities-two-presbyteries-receive-mission-program-grants/
[38] "October 2021 Synod Assembly: Rhythm of the Synod," Synod of the Trinity, November 4, 2021, under "Report of the Synod's Permanent Judicial Commission," https://www.syntrinity.org/featured/october-2021-synod-assembly-rhythm-of-the-synod/

congregational discernment, noting both that the property had originally been purchased by Rev. Tega Swann for the use of Refreshing Springs and that the Session had concluded it no longer served the church's mission and ministry, a judgment the presbytery then formally ratified. Yet subsequent presbytery records show that sustainability was increasingly narrated through administrative and financial categories, with Refreshing Springs described as not being on a trajectory toward self-sufficiency and later as a body whose members wished to remain together in ministry, but not as a "church," thereby signaling a shift in how viability was being institutionally defined. That shift, however, did not proceed uncontested. Later proceedings document Rev. Swann's objections to the process by which these conclusions were reached, the demand that Refreshing Springs representatives be heard, and explicit concern that the church was being moved from "church" to "ministry" without adequate transparency, consultation, or regard for voices from within the congregation. The documentary trail demonstrates that the harm to Refreshing Springs was not merely rhetorical but administrative and material. The Beaver-Butler Presbytery Coordinating Team's November 4, 2020 minutes expressly recognized the need to review the February 2020 Refreshing Springs session minutes in order to verify the basis of earlier statements that had been passed along about the congregation.[39] Nevertheless, before that dispute had been resolved in any transparent or restorative way, the January 2021 Administrative Commission motion proposed removing the congregation's ordinary session authority and transferring control to an externally appointed body, based on an account advanced by the same institutional

[39] Beaver-Butler Presbytery, Coordinating Team Meeting Minutes, November 4, 2020, in Pre-Mail for January 23, 2021 Presbytery Meeting, 10.

leadership implicated in the contested reporting.[40] In evidentiary terms, these documents show that the disputed characterization of Refreshing Springs did not remain an internal misunderstanding; it became a predicate for formal presbytery intervention affecting the congregation's leadership structure and institutional continuity. Read together, these materials suggest that institutional friction emerged not simply from disagreement over property or finance, but from competing understandings of who had authority to define faithful discernment, what counted as sustainable ministry, and how power operated when a marginalized congregation's future was being interpreted within broader presbytery structures.

The contrast is striking: a socioeconomically marginalized Black congregation that had sustained its ministry for eight years before denominational affiliation was subsequently diminished within an affluent and overwhelmingly white regional body, and ultimately ceased to exist as a congregation within Beaver-Butler Presbytery. [41] While the denomination celebrated church-planting and diversity in principle, a thriving church plant among the poor was functionally treated as expendable in practice. As such, the Refreshing Springs' case illustrates how institutional friction may arise when formal structures of oversight and financial reasoning intersect with local claims to spiritual agency, communal voice, and the right to participate in defining the terms of a congregation's future. This paradoxical experience raised urgent questions such as:

> How was the poor church more functional and sustainable prior to becoming part of an institutional community? How do communities of the poor survive and thrive without the resources typically available to the affluent? What happens

[40] Beaver-Butler Presbytery, Ministry and Vocation Committee, "Administrative Commission Motion," January 2021.
[41] "Churches in Our Presbytery," *Beaver-Butler Presbytery*, accessed February 5, 2026, http://beaverbutler.org/churches-in-our-presbytery/.

> when such previously ‘self-sustaining’ congregations enter majority-white denominational structures that are ostensibly committed to justice and inclusion but continue to operate from paradigms of affluence and control?

Situating the Problem Within Broader Patterns

As established in the “Context and Significance of the Study” discussion above, these questions point toward realities extending far beyond one congregation or presbytery,[42] and building on the argument developed earlier in this chapter, this study proceeds from the conviction that church-planting norms in North America are often framed by affluent, male, majority-white ecclesial paradigms. Such paradigms implicitly define what a viable church plant looks like—often emphasizing financial self-sufficiency, professionalized leadership, building ownership, and alignment with middle-class cultural norms—while under-theorizing and under-resourcing church plants that take shape among socioeconomically disenfranchised Black communities. Amid growing awareness of racial, economic, and institutional disparities in church vitality, there remains insufficient theological, missiological, and ecclesiological reflection on how disenfranchised Black congregations effectively establish and sustain worshiping communities. Denominational structures in the United States, particularly within historically white mainline traditions, often implicitly privilege affluent, white-led churches through patterns of resourcing, narrative framing, success metrics, and leadership paradigms that align with middle-class and professional norms. In such systems, congregations located among the poor and led by people whose identities resist

[42] Presbytery of Baltimore, “Presbytery of Baltimore Approves Groundbreaking Reparative Justice Fund,” press release, September 13, 2025, https://baltimorepresbytery.org/reparative-justice-fund/.

these norms—Black women, single mothers, immigrants, and lay leaders without traditional credentials—frequently find their experiences marginalized or misinterpreted.

The practical dimension of this problem is visible in the kinds of support or scrutiny that congregations receive. Churches able to demonstrate immediate financial strength, property ownership, and predictable growth curves tend to be celebrated as strategic investments, while congregations rooted among the poor may be treated as liabilities even when their missional engagement and community impact are substantial.[43] When economic scarcity intersects with race and gender, the risk of misrecognition intensifies: leaders like myself who embody Black, single mother, female, immigrant, and other non-traditional church-planting identities encounter forms of surveillance, paternalism, tokenization, or neglect that undermine their ministries.

Beyond these practical realities lies a deeper theological problem. Dominant models of church-planting and ecclesial success often lack robust theological frameworks that affirm church plants initiated and sustained by socioeconomically disenfranchised Black communities as *normative expressions of God's mission*. Instead, these congregations are frequently interpreted through deficit lenses: as projects to be helped rather than partners to be heeded, as exceptions to be managed rather than paradigmatic communities whose experiences might re-educate the wider church.[44] Such frameworks can unintentionally reproduce the very marginalization they claim to address, by imagining the affluent as hosts of God's mission and the poor as guests or recipients.

---

[43] Beaver-Butler Presbytery, "Coordinating Team Meeting Minutes, July 1, 2020," in Reports to Beaver-Butler Presbytery: Tuesday, September 22, 2020, 10, quoted in section 14, "Ministry Vocation Committee."

[44] Jane Johnson and Helen Dean, "Commissioners' Resolution: On the Challenge of Being Black in the PC (USA)," PC-Biz, 223rd General Assembly (2018), prefile no. CR-016, accessed March 29, 2026, https://www.pc-biz.org/search/3000486. -

The experience of Refreshing Springs highlights the consequences of this deficit framing. The congregation's pre-presbytery years demonstrated that a socioeconomically poor church can function effectively and sustainably as a missional community through relational partnerships, spiritual resilience, and contextual creativity. Yet within an affluent presbytery, the same congregation's low socioeconomic status was invoked as the rationale for curtailing its constitutional rights and ultimately dismantling its institutional presence—even as the denomination publicly promoted church-planting and diversity.[45] This paradox signals a deeper dissonance between proclaimed commitments to justice and the operative logics of power, race, and wealth in denominational decision-making.

Theologically, this dissonance reveals a failure to take seriously the canonical pattern in which God's mission proceeds from the margins toward the center, rather than from the center toward the margins. This project seeks to respond to that gap by focusing on how socioeconomically disenfranchised Black communities in Aliquippa—particularly the congregations of Deliverance Temple Church (Church of God in Christ) and Sound the Alarm Ministries Church (independent, non-denominational)—have been planted and sustained apart from the institutional capital, financial security, and cultural prestige often assumed in church-planting literature. By placing the story of Refreshing Springs in conversation with these congregations' narratives, the study aims to illuminate

---

45 Beaver-Butler Presbytery, "Coordinating Team Meeting Minutes, January 22, 2021," in Reports to Beaver-Butler Presbytery: January 23, 2021 - "Churches in Our Presbytery,"

how Black church plants in a deindustrialized, racialized context both expose the limitations of dominant paradigms and embody alternative, effective models of mission.

Purpose, Thesis, and Research Questions

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to discern, understand, and affirm the missional praxis of church-planting by socioeconomically disenfranchised Black communities within majority-white mainline denominational contexts, with particular attention to Aliquippa, Pennsylvania. It seeks to document and analyze how congregations like Deliverance Temple Church and Sound the Alarm Ministries Church narrate their origins, develop leadership models, form membership identities, and sustain their ministries over time despite systemic disparities in resources and recognition. By placing these narratives in critical and constructive conversation with the story of Refreshing Springs and with biblical and theological traditions, the project aims to generate recommendations that help denominations and local church leaders more faithfully affirm, resource, and sustain church-planting by marginalized demographics. This overarching purpose supports my specific thesis that:

> Disenfranchised communities of color, particularly Black communities, embody God's mission of church-planting through contextualized leadership, spiritual resilience, and communal empowerment, thereby demonstrating how ordinary people in marginalized contexts sustain vibrant worshiping communities that defy socioeconomic limitations.
>
> Furthermore, when majority-white mainline denominations fail to recognize and strengthen these practices, they not only perpetuate racial and economic injustices but also distort their own participation in God's mission by privileging models of church that center affluence and institutional stability over the biblical pattern of power made perfect in weakness.

Flowing from this thesis, the study operates with my working hypothesis that:

> Church plants by disenfranchised Black communities function sustainably and effectively by relying on biblical models of mission which are centered on the poor and marginalized and employ leadership and congregational practices that resist dominant paradigms that privilege affluence. However, they often receive insufficient institutional support within majority-white denominations.

The project tests and refines this hypothesis through qualitative multiple-case study research with Deliverance Temple and Sound the Alarm churches, interpreted through the lens of my own experience and the formation and dismantling of Refreshing Springs within Beaver-Butler Presbytery and the PC(USA).

Primary Research Question

Guided by this problem, purpose, thesis, and working hypothesis, the primary research question is:

> How do disenfranchised communities of color, especially Black communities, participate in the establishment and sustainability of church-planting without the socioeconomic resources, institutional support, and established networks available to more affluent communities and churches?

To explore this question in sufficient depth, the study employs the following sub-questions:

1. How do Deliverance Temple and Sound the Alarm Ministries churches narrate their origins and sense of call as church plants in a socioeconomically disenfranchised, post-industrial context?
2. What leadership practices in these congregations sustain their participation in God's mission in the absence of robust institutional support and financial security?
3. How do membership and belonging function under conditions of socioeconomic disenfranchisement, and in what ways do congregational practices foster resilience, mutual care, and missional engagement among members?

4. What theological narratives and interpretations of Scripture guide these congregations' understandings of sustainability, and how do these narratives challenge or reframe dominant ecclesial paradigms?

These questions situate the inquiry at the intersection of socioeconomic analysis, ecclesiology, and missiology and aim to produce contextually rooted church-planting insights that broaden the church's vision of mission and reorient denominational practice toward the wisdom of marginalized communities, and are investigated through a comparative case study of these two Black-led congregations in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania: **Sound the Alarm Ministries** and **Deliverance Temple Ministries, Church of God in Christ**.[46] Aliquippa is a small, post-industrial city whose economic fortunes have been shaped by the rise and collapse of the Jones & Laughlin steel works; at its height the mill employed tens of thousands, but its closure precipitated decades of population loss, unemployment, and disinvestment that disproportionately affected Black residents.[47] Within this setting, Black congregations have long served as spiritual, social, and economic anchors, sustaining communal life amid racialized inequality and economic decline.

Sound the Alarm Ministries

Sound the Alarm Ministries is an independent, non-denominational congregation founded in Aliquippa in 1989 by a bi-racial couple, Pastors Rick and Vera Shymoniak, both of whom were formed in the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), where they discerned a distinct evangelistic and pastoral call that was affirmed and supported by

---

[46] On comparative congregational case studies in ecclesiology and practical theology, see Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 6th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2018).
[47] Beaver County Historical Research and Landmarks Foundation, "ALIQUIPPA – The Ethnic Experience, 1920–1970," accessed February 8, 2026, https://bcpahistory.org/bchrlf/aliquippa-ethnic-experience.

their leadership.[48] While engaged to be married and serving together in ministry under Pastor David L. Armstead, they initially sensed a call to evangelism, then church-planting. They prayerfully discerned the name 'Sound the Alarm' for their church, and later received prophetic confirmation of that name while visiting a pastor in Connecticut.[49] Before planting the church, they conducted itinerant evangelistic work across West Virginia, Ohio, Pittsburgh, and Beaver County—holding weekend seminars in churches and recreation rooms, tent meetings in housing projects, and retreats—before beginning a home Bible study in Aliquippa that functioned effectively as a house church, marked by reports of healings, deliverance, and conversions.[50]

In 1989, they registered Sound the Alarm Ministries as a church in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and began to seek a permanent worship space.[51] The Lord's leading, as they narrate it, drew them repeatedly back to a 900-square-foot building at the base of Linmar Terrace, a public housing development on Kennedy Boulevard, a building Pastor Vera had prayed over years earlier under her former COGIC pastor as a potential site for ministry.[52] Lacking the funds to secure the building, they continued to meet in their home until the day a young man attending the Bible study, prompted (as he told them) by God, privately handed them an envelope containing the exact amount needed to secure the building just days before the payment was due.[53] In 1990, Sound the Alarm held its first worship service at 1435 Kennedy Boulevard with

---

[48] Vera Shymoniak, interview by Oghene'tega Violet Ogbon (Swann), Aliquippa, PA, February 26, 2026.
[49] Shymoniak interview.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.

approximately ten members and visitors in a 900-square-foot storefront at the foot of a now-abandoned steel-mill town.[54]

From the outset, the congregation interpreted Aliquippa's economic devastation not as a deterrent but as a missional summons: "Where better to plant a church than in a deprived region, where the need is greatest and the glory of God can be more revealed?"[55] At the Kennedy Boulevard site they focused on serving nearby housing developments, especially Linmar Terrace and Valley Terrace with children's and youth ministries.[56] They launched "Mighty Warriors" camp, transporting children at no cost to church-run camps in places like Laurelville, Jumonville, and the mountains of Mount Pleasant to broaden their horizons beyond the confines of the projects.[57] Soon, the church grew numerically and the 900-square-foot space quickly proved inadequate for both worship and programming, leading the church to seek larger facilities.

While assisting a homeless young mother to secure housing, Pastor Vera inquired about the former Jones & Laughlin company store building at 434 Franklin Avenue, then an 11,000-square-foot structure in a red-light district marked by drug trafficking and prostitution.[58] While in conversation with the property managers, she articulated a vision for a worship center, daycare, and community services that would serve low-income families, children, and youth.[59] Needing a community-oriented tenant to meet HUD requirements, the owners offered the building at low cost to the church. The building was renovated for the church's programs largely by church members and Sound the Alarm

---

[54] Shymoniak interview.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.

officially moved in in 1995.[60] The congregation came to see this building as the "gate of the city," a strategic spiritual and social entry point for ministry in Aliquippa.[61]

In this expanded space, Sound the Alarm developed a network of ministries under the umbrella of the **Hope Christian Center**, designed to address economic, educational, and social deficits in the community in explicitly Christ-centered ways.[62] **In His Hands** Daycare opened in 1995, offering low-cost childcare to Aliquippa, Ambridge, Hopewell, and surrounding communities, with an intentional commitment to remain below market rates to serve financially strained families, especially single mothers returning to the workforce.[63] Over time, the daycare and its related Early Childhood Multisensory Learning Center served over 1,000 children, focusing on literacy, numeracy, motor skills, language and social skills, decision-making, and character formation with many three-year-olds reportedly reading and entering school ahead of grade level.[64]

In 1997, Sound the Alarm launched the **Y.E.S. (Youth Empowered to Succeed) Program**, matching teenagers aged 14–18 with apprenticeships and jobs in local businesses, hospitals, daycare centers, and other organizations.[65] The church provided transportation, training in interview skills and workplace etiquette, résumé preparation, and stipends funded largely by the congregation's tithes and offerings, with some later grant support through the Hope Christian Center.[66] In 2002, following the closure of regional Christian School, the church founded **Hope Christian Academy**, registered with the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as a non-public, non-licensed private school, initially

---

[60] Shymoniak interview.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.

serving grades 7–12 and later expanding to include grades 1–6.[67] Using an Accelerated Christian Education curriculum supplemented by Montessori methods and partnerships with the Carnegie Science Center and Geneva College, the school graduated six classes, with most students continuing on to four-year colleges or technical schools and some entering college with sophomore-level credits.[68]

Throughout these developments, Sound the Alarm remained financially and structurally independent: the ministry received no ongoing denominational subsidy and was initially "not savvy" about grant funding and instead relied primarily on member tithes, offerings, small donors, and in-kind support from local businesses.[69] The leadership structure consists of the founders (Pastors Rick and Vera Shymoniak) and a board of five elders who meet monthly for prayer and decision-making regarding finances, outreach, and program evaluation, with annual or semiannual "state of the church" reports presented to the congregation.[70] The church's self-understanding is explicitly theocentric and missional: leadership describes the church as "an army of few" whose members move as one, a "relentless company of God-reverencing servants" called to the "restoration of the total person"—spiritually, economically, and socially—in an economically deprived city.[71]

Deliverance Temple Ministries (Church of God in Christ)

Deliverance Temple Ministries is a Church of God in Christ congregation in Aliquippa, currently pastored by Bishop Marvin Moreland, who recently became the

---

[67] Shymoniak interview.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.

Prelate (jurisdictional bishop) of the First Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction of Western Pennsylvania in the COGIC denomination.[72] Bishop Moreland is a third-generation Aliquippan: his grandparents migrated from small towns in Georgia (Franklin and Willacoochee), his parents settled in Aliquippa in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and he was born and raised in the city.[73] After attending California University of Pennsylvania, where he studied Social Work and Communications, he returned to Aliquippa to support his single mother and younger siblings, choosing to remain rooted in the community even as many peers left for military service or employment opportunities elsewhere.[74]

As a young man, Moreland's trajectory was profoundly shaped by racialized injustice when he was falsely accused of attempted murder by two white male youth from neighboring Hopewell, an accusation later recanted in court when they admitted fabricating the story to cover their own misconduct.[75] The episode derailed his plans to enter the Air Force but also became part of his testimony as he encountered Pentecostal worship for the first time at a local COGIC congregation, experienced conversion, and began a lifelong commitment to ministry.[76]

Deliverance Temple was founded by Dr. James Watkins, under whose leadership Moreland was "saved" (came to know Christ), discipled, married, and formed in ministry.[77] Over the years, he served in virtually every available role in the local church—van driver, janitor, Sunday school teacher, associate minister, and ordained elder—embodying his conviction that "whatever your hands find to do, do it" and that

---

[72] Marvin Moreland, interview by Oghene'tega Violet Ogbon (Swann), Aliquippa, PA, February 15, 2026..
[73] Moreland interview.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.

"nothing is above you, nothing is beneath you."[78] When Dr. Watkins suffered a series of strokes, Moreland and other leaders were tasked with carrying the ministry forward.[79] For approximately five years, he effectively led the congregation while consistently honoring Watkins as pastor, physically carrying him up the church steps so he could attend worship, and maintaining public deference to his authority.[80] After Watkins's death, the jurisdictional bishop, observing Moreland's faithfulness and de facto leadership, appointed him pastor of Deliverance Temple in 1998; he celebrated his twenty-seventh pastoral anniversary on October 27, 2024.[81]

When Moreland first came into the church, the Jones & Laughlin steel mill still employed an estimated 20,000 workers in Aliquippa, and local congregations, including Deliverance Temple, benefitted from the relative economic stability of working-class families.[82] The mill's closure, however, precipitated major upheaval: families left the area, tax revenues collapsed, crime and addiction rose, and churches were left with "skeleton crews" and diminished financial bases.[83] Deliverance Temple responded by "repackaging" ministry, shifting energy from programmatic activity inside the four walls to intentional outreach in the streets and neighborhoods.[84] The congregation conducted "street meetings" throughout Aliquippa, bringing worship, preaching, and prayer into housing projects and other public spaces to proclaim a message of hope, love, and inclusion to people who felt forgotten.[85]

---

[78] Moreland interview.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.

Beyond evangelistic outreach, Deliverance Temple became deeply involved in addressing youth violence, educational failure, and mass incarceration.[86] A pivotal initiative emerged through the work of a congregant, Selena Moreland, a probation officer who was permitted to establish her office in Aliquippa High School because 90 percent of her caseload came from that district.[87] With county support, she launched **Village Keepers**, an in-school and after-school program for youth on probation.[88] Out of this collaboration, Deliverance Temple founded **R.O.O.T.S. (Reaching Over Obstacles To Succeed)**, initially as an after-school program in the church basement and later as an alternative school and re-entry program operating in facilities on Kennedy Boulevard and Franklin Avenue.[89] R.O.O.T.S. provided academic assistance, life-skills training, mentorship, and structured support for youth who were suspended, court-ordered, or otherwise at risk, functioning as an unofficial extension of the Aliquippa School District; some students attended R.O.O.T.S. full-time while still receiving diplomas from the district.[90]

Over twenty to twenty-five years, R.O.O.T.S. evolved in response to shifting needs, eventually becoming a re-entry program for adults leaving incarceration, helping them reconnect with families, address addiction, and reduce recidivism.[91] Many participants and their families developed relationships with Deliverance Temple such that the church became, in Moreland's words, a "support system" providing prayer, food, transportation, clothing, and practical assistance in crisis.[92] These ministries, along with

---

[86] Moreland interview.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid.

informal networks of mutual aid within the congregation exemplified the church's role as a "safe place" where people could experience spiritual and emotional relief from daily struggle and discover their worth as persons "fearfully and wonderfully made" by God.[93]

Deliverance Temple's leadership structure reflects both COGIC polity and local adaptation.[94] At the congregational level, the pastor works with associate elders, evangelists, and lay leaders who share responsibilities according to the national constitution while allowing for local autonomy in ministry initiatives.[95] At the jurisdictional level, Bishop Moreland oversees approximately thirty-five churches from Erie to Johnstown as part of the First Jurisdiction of Western Pennsylvania, working through a tiered structure of administrative assistants, district superintendents, pastors, and departmental leaders (women's, youth, Sunday school, missions, music, evangelism).[96] He has authority to install pastors and elders, call meetings, and intervene in local conflicts, but emphasizes collaborative decision-making through committees and maintains that his role is to help churches survive and thrive spiritually rather than to dictate their internal life.[97]

Economically, Deliverance Temple has shared the precariousness of many Black churches in deindustrialized contexts.[98] The congregation has long included significant numbers of low-income members—people on welfare, unemployed, or working in low-wage jobs—and has often lacked the resources to provide full-time pastoral salaries; like many peers, Moreland has maintained secular employment alongside his pastoral

---

93 Moreland interview.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.

duties.[99] The church participates in Black ecclesial practices such as annual pastor's anniversaries as a way of honoring pastoral labor, but regular offerings are primarily used to "keep the doors open" and support ministry rather than to provide robust compensation.[100] To sustain its work, Deliverance Temple has supplemented tithes and offerings with programmatic funding (through R.O.O.T.S. and related initiatives), grants, and partnerships while refusing to entertain the notion of closing its doors or relocating to more affluent areas despite opportunities to do so.[101]

For Moreland, the congregation's perseverance is grounded in a theological conviction about calling and place: he repeatedly frames his ministry in terms of being "planted" by God in Aliquippa, with the church understood as a strategically placed resource in the community and himself as a servant whose steps are ordered by the Lord.[102] Stories of intervening in moments of crisis—disarming a student who hid a gun, accompanying a young man facing a long sentence, encouraging a dying man in the hospital, welcoming two men recently delivered from addiction—function as concrete embodiments of this vocation.[103] In his words, obstacles are "temporary setbacks," and the task of the church is to "keep fighting through," trusting that "God is up to something and we are right in the middle of it."[104]

By foregrounding the histories, practices, and theological self-understandings of Sound the Alarm Ministries and Deliverance Temple Ministries at this point in Chapter 1, the study introduces its primary research sites as the central dialog partners for the

---

99 Moreland Interview.
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid.
103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.

project.[105] This contextualization allows later chapters to focus directly on thematic analysis of interview data without needing to re-narrate the congregations' origin stories or ministry trajectories, thereby maintaining coherence and avoiding redundancy.

These two congregations thus embody the central concerns of this study: how Black churches in socioeconomically disenfranchised, post-industrial contexts plant and sustain congregations, develop leadership, and engage in mission without the socioeconomic resources, institutional support, and established networks commonly assumed in dominant church-planting paradigms.

Research Methodology & Design

This study employs a qualitative multiple-case study research design shaped by a causal/predictive model that seeks to answer the question, "How did this come to be?" in relation to church plants by socioeconomically disenfranchised Black communities that have functioned sustainably and effectively without the institutional resources often associated with successful church-planting. The design is intentionally contextual and interpretive, integrating theological reflection with empirical data drawn from the lived experiences of the case study's congregational leaders in Aliquippa.

Primary Research Sites and Selection Rationale

The primary research sites are Deliverance Temple Church, a Church of God in Christ congregation, and Sound the Alarm Church, an independent, non-denominational congregation, both located in Aliquippa. These congregations were selected because their founding stories, leadership configurations, membership demographics, and sustainability

[105] Moreland Interview.

practices bear significant resemblance to those of Refreshing Springs prior to its incorporation into the PC(USA), yet they are not institutionally connected to each other or to Refreshing Springs. By focusing on these two church plants, the study seeks to understand *patterns and practices that may be intrinsic to Black church-planting in socioeconomically disenfranchised contexts rather than unique to a single congregation*.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection will center on semi-structured interviews with recognized leaders in each congregation. Interview questions will focus on four thematic areas: origins and founding, leadership, membership and belonging, and sustainability. With participants' consent, interviews will be recorded to preserve narrative flow and to respect participants' time, then transcribed for analysis. The transcripts will be coded inductively and deductively, with codes clustered into broader themes corresponding to the four focal areas while remaining open to emergent categories that reflect participants' own interpretive frameworks.

While formal interviews in the primary data set will be conducted with recognized leaders—pastors and key lay leaders—the study understands lay participation and community practices as integral to both the lived reality and the interpretation of these congregations' missional life. Lay voices and practices will be accessed indirectly through leaders' narratives and descriptions and where feasible and appropriate, may also be engaged directly through focus groups or additional interviews with lay members. This approach acknowledges both the logistical constraints of the project and the theological conviction that leadership in marginalized church plants is deeply embedded in the life and agency of the wider congregation.

Data Analysis and Theological Integration

The analysis phase will integrate thematic findings with biblical and theological reflection, drawing on the interpretive frameworks outlined above. For example, narratives of economic scarcity and communal generosity will be read alongside González's work on wealth and early Christianity and McKnight and Block's concept of abundant community; stories of racialized marginalization within denominational structures will be interpreted through Jennings' account of race and the Christian imagination and Newbigin's theology of the cross-shaped foolishness of the gospel. This integrative approach seeks not only to describe what these congregations do but to discern how their practices bear theological meaning and missional significance.

Collaborative Validation and Peer Review

A final component of the design involves collaborative validation and reflection. Once initial findings and draft recommendations have been developed, they will be presented to a group of practitioners—either denominational leaders involved in church-planting and/or a focus group composed of the original interviewees—for constructive and critical feedback. This step allows experienced practitioners to assess the accuracy, relevance, and practicality of the study's interpretations and recommendations, functioning as a form of peer review that honors the agency and wisdom of those who inhabit the contexts under study. Their responses will be incorporated into the final set of recommendations and conclusions, strengthening the project's credibility and practical utility.

Overall, the methodology aims to integrate theological, practical, and contextual insights, as well as collaboration with experienced practitioners for peer validation—in

order to develop transferable, contextually grounded guidelines for planting and sustaining congregations among historically marginalized demographics.[106]

Delimitations

Several delimitations shape the scope and focus of this study. First, the research is geographically delimited to Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, a post-industrial city in Beaver County with particular demographic, economic, and ecclesial characteristics that may not be directly replicable elsewhere. While the findings may offer insights applicable to other deindustrialized, socioeconomically disenfranchised communities, the analysis is intentionally rooted in this specific place.

Second, the study focuses exclusively on two predominantly Black church plants in Aliquippa—Deliverance Temple Ministries (COGIC) and Sound the Alarm Ministries (independent, non-denominational)—selected because of their resemblance to the founding, leadership, membership, and sustainability patterns of Refreshing Springs Ministry. These congregations are not meant to represent all Black church plants or all churches in Aliquippa but serve as in-depth case studies through which to explore church-planting by disenfranchised Black communities in a majority-white, mainline denominational environment.

Third, the primary data set is delimited to individuals serving in recognized leadership roles within these congregations, including pastors and key lay leaders. For reasons of scope and feasibility, the study does not conduct separate, systematic interviews with all categories of congregants or with denominational officials beyond the practitioners involved in the focus-group validation phase. At the same time, the analysis

---

[106] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977), 110.

critically attends to how leaders describe lay participation, informal leadership, and broader community agency, recognizing these as essential to understanding church-planting in disenfranchised Black communities.

Fourth, the project is delimited by time. It focuses primarily on the period from the founding of the two congregations through the time of data collection, and on the period from the inception of Refreshing Springs in Aliquippa through its incorporation into and subsequent exit from Beaver-Butler Presbytery. While historical and denominational developments prior to and beyond these windows inform the background, they are not the primary focus of analysis.

These delimitations are not weaknesses but clarifications that enable the study to offer a thick, contextually grounded account of church-planting by disenfranchised Black communities in one particular place, while inviting further research that might extend, test, or adapt its findings in other settings.

Overview of the Study

This introductory chapter has situated the research in the socioeconomic and ecclesial context of Aliquippa, articulated the problem, purpose, thesis, and research questions, sketched the project's theological and theoretical orientation, outlined the qualitative multiple-case study design, and clarified key delimitations and terms.

Chapter 2 will develop the biblical and theological rationale for centering socioeconomically disenfranchised communities in mission and church-planting. It will review relevant literature on church-planting models, the sociocultural and economic challenges that shape congregational sustainability, and critical theological analyses of dominant ecclesial paradigms, including works on Black ecclesiology, feminist theology,

and postcolonial perspectives. This chapter will synthesize insights from missiology, practical theology, sociology of religion, and race and religion studies to situate the Aliquippa congregations within a wider field of study that engages theological voices such as González, Jennings, Newbigin, Kwok, and Russell to construct a framework in which Black church plants in places like Aliquippa are recognized as primary sites of God's mission rather than peripheral endeavors.

Chapter 3 will present the research methodology in detail, including participant and site selection, interview protocols, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations, followed by the presentation and interpretation of findings from Deliverance Temple and Sound the Alarm churches. It will organize the results around the themes of origins/founding, leadership, membership and belonging, and sustainability, integrating participants' narratives with biblical and theological reflection.

Chapter 4 will conclude with actionable recommendations for denominations and church leaders, shaped and refined through a collaborative focus-group process, to affirm and sustain church-planting by socioeconomically disenfranchised Black communities in majority-white mainline denominations.

Chapter 2: Theological and Ecclesial Frameworks for Congregational Life in Marginalized Contexts

Re-Theorizing Ecclesial Vitality: A Generative Critique of Deficit Narratives in Black Church Planting

As established in Chapter One, church-planting paradigms in North America have been largely constructed from within affluent, male-led, majority-white ecclesial ecosystems. As Chapter 1 demonstrated, dominant paradigms assume access to donor networks, middle-class social capital, institutional insulation, and denominational stability. Success is commonly measured through financial self-sufficiency within compressed timelines, property acquisition, numerical growth curves, and cultural alignment with professionalized leadership norms. Congregations that do not conform to these metrics are often rendered marginal, fragile, or "at risk." This chapter advances a contrary and generative claim: the deficit narratives surrounding marginalized Black church plants are not merely incomplete—they are theologically misconceived and analytically distorted. They mistake proximity to wealth, whiteness, and maleness for ecclesial vitality and thereby obscure the theological substance of communities that do not conform to those markers. The central argument of this literature review is therefore twofold:

> First, dominant church-planting scholarship frequently operationalizes vitality through metrics derived from socioeconomically privileged contexts, thereby normalizing affluence and institutional power as implicit ecclesial standards.
>
> Second, when the literature is reread through feminist, postcolonial, Black ecclesial, and missional theological frameworks, a different account of vitality emerges—one rooted not in capital accumulation or institutional scale but in Spirit-

empowered resilience, communal interdependence, contextual leadership, and faithfulness amid structural constraint.

If financial security, whiteness, and maleness are not normative indicators of ecclesial vitality, then what is?

This chapter argues that ecclesial vitality, rightly understood, is measured by a community's *participation in the missio Dei*—particularly among the poor, racially marginalized, and structurally disenfranchised. From this vantage point, many marginalized Black church plants do not represent ecclesial weakness; rather, they expose the inadequacy of dominant evaluative frameworks. The theological foundations for this claim have already been established in the prior chapter, which demonstrated that Scripture consistently locates divine agency among those pushed to the margins and that leadership in the ecclesia is constituted by Spirit-enabled participation rather than social dominance. The prophetic tradition, Pauline ecclesiology, and Pentecostal pneumatology destabilize hierarchies of wealth, gender, and race as indicators of faithfulness. If this biblical grammar is taken seriously, then vitality cannot be equated with affluence without theological contradiction. The literature review therefore proceeds not as a neutral survey but as a critical re-reading of the field. It interrogates how:

- Missional ecclesiology has been appropriated within institutional systems that continue to privilege dominant bodies.
- Church-growth research has normalized middle-class economic assumptions.
- Denominational sustainability models embed racialized and classed expectations.
- Sociological measures of health frequently conflate viability with financial surplus.

Simultaneously, the review surfaces alternative frameworks that destabilize these assumptions:

- Feminist theology re-centers bodies historically excluded from ecclesial authority and redefines leadership through resilience, relationality, and embodied wisdom.
- Postcolonial theology exposes how Western Christian imagination racialized authority and equated legitimacy with Eurocentric norms.
- Black ecclesial history demonstrates how congregations have functioned as counter-publics, sustaining worship and communal life without institutional patronage.
- Asset-based community theory reframes scarcity narratives by foregrounding relational abundance and mutual aid as primary indicators of communal strength.

Taken together, these streams yield the generative thesis for this chapter:

> When vitality is defined by dominant institutional metrics, church plants by marginalized Black communities appear deficient; when vitality is defined by participation in God's redemptive mission among the least, they often appear paradigmatic.

This reframing carries significant implications. By failing to attend seriously to church planting among marginalized Black demographics, dominant scholarship does not merely overlook data; it perpetuates ecclesiological distortion. It obscures forms of faithfulness that do not conform to affluent templates and thereby reinscribes racialized hierarchies within theological discourse. In other words, what is at stake is not representation but ecclesial truthfulness. The argument advanced here is generative rather than merely corrective because it does not simply critique deficit narratives. Rather it proposes an alternative account of what a vital church is. Through engagement with ecclesiological, racial, sociological, and pneumatological scholarship, this chapter

contends that marginalized Black church plants are not peripheral anomalies within the missional landscape. They are ***critical interpretive sites for re-theorizing ecclesial vitality itself.*** If the center has defined vitality in its own image, this review asks whether the margins reveal it more faithfully.

By mapping the scholarly terrain through this lens, this chapter prepares the way for the empirical investigation that follows: it clarifies that this study does not seek to explain why marginalized congregations fail to meet dominant standards. Rather, it seeks to test *whether dominant standards fail to recognize genuine participation in God's mission by demonstrating that the deficit lies in the evaluative framework itself.* This problem is not only sociological or institutional; it is a theological and missional problem that concerns the church's understanding of *where and how* God's Spirit is at work in the formation and sustenance of worshiping communities.

Biblical Rationale

Church Planting in Scripture

Ascertaining the role that socioeconomic status plays in biblical church planting requires that we first identify what constitutes biblical church planting. As an institutional endeavor, church planting does not exist in the Bible. However, if the church is understood as the calling together, gathering, and spiritual formation of a people into an identifiable community of worship, biblical examples abound from both the Old and New Testaments to support the concept of church planting. Equally identifiable are the socioeconomic statuses of such community formations. From this perspective, the biblical narratives contain abundant evidence of the establishment, full functionality, participation, belonging,

and sustenance of socioeconomically disenfranchised communities of faith in God's mission.

Indeed, from biblical examples, socioeconomic disenfranchisement appears to be the center from which God's power and mission radiate outward to the world. The Old Testament narratives demonstrate this pattern repeatedly. For example, God: calls a childless couple without heirs and therefore without social power (Genesis 12); chooses the younger twin, Jacob, rather than the heir apparent, Esau (Genesis 25:23); selects the least of Jesse's siblings, the young shepherd boy David, to be king (1 Samuel 16:1–13). This pattern culminates in the liberation, empowerment, and formation of the formerly enslaved, socioeconomically disenfranchised descendants of Abraham into the biblical nation of Israel. Out of this Old Testament formation comes a new formation in the New Testament: the community of the Jewish Messiah. From its inception, the coming of the Messiah takes place not in the grandeur of a palace but in a barn, with barnyard animals as the birthing community (Luke 2:4–7). The story of the Messiah—upon which the Gospel, the message of God's salvation, and the gathering and formation of the community of the saved are predicated—centers on God the Son leaving all divine riches to assume life as a socioeconomically disenfranchised mortal human being.

Jesus and Socioeconomic Disenfranchisement

One of the most revealing biblical texts is Matthew 8:18–20 (with parallels in Luke 9:57–58), where the Messiah, Yeshua, describes his own poverty, "Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." (Matthew 8:20, NIV). In a world where everyone has a place to call home, the Messiah had no

residential address. Instead, he was a wanderer, dependent on the hospitality of others for his room and board. This voluntary assumption of socioeconomic marginality lies at the heart of the Gospel message.

Mary's Prophetic Vision

In her prophetic declaration—the Magnificat—following the Angel Gabriel's annunciation to her, Mary articulates the lifting up of the poor and disenfranchised as the central vocation of the long-awaited Messiah:

> My soul glorifies the Lord
> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
> for he has been mindful
> of the humble state of his servant.
> From now on all generations will call me blessed,
> for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
> holy is his name.
> His mercy extends to those who fear him,
> from generation to generation.
> He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
> he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
> He has brought down rulers from their thrones
> but has lifted up the humble.
> He has filled the hungry with good things
> but has sent the rich away empty.
> He has helped his servant Israel,
> remembering to be merciful
> to Abraham and his descendants forever,
> just as he promised our ancestors.
> (Luke 1:47–55, NIV emphasis mine)

The understanding that the Messiah comes for the liberation and empowerment of the socioeconomically disenfranchised was so deeply ingrained in the message of the community of salvation that Yeshua's disciples even mistakenly expected him to form an army to lead rebellion against Roman occupation (Acts 1:6). The biblical message of

salvation has always been understood to flow from a center of weak and disempowered communities outward, not the other way around. The Gospel of the Messiah is not meant to form a community of comfort for the rich but instead a place of belonging and affirmation for the poor and disenfranchised.

The Apostolic Pattern

The Apostle Paul emphasizes just how centrally the poor and socio-politically weak function as hosts rather than guests within God's community of salvation in and through Jesus Christ:

> Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. (1 Corinthians 1:26–29, NIV, emphasis mine)

Paul does not arrive at this conclusion independently but rather from the documented accounts of Yeshua's ministry before and after crucifixion. Yeshua's teachings and practices of gathering and spiritual formation of community always centered on drawing in those who had been disenfranchised by the secular and religious worlds, and it was to these that he entrusted the continuation of his ministry.

Yeshua's constant reiterations that he came for the sick not the healthy, and his offering of himself as food and drink, were not meant to assuage and satiate the hunger and thirst of the privileged for more power but to empower the lowly of the earth to find and take their strength and sustenance from what he offers. He goes so far as to challenge his

followers for assuming the secular mindset of elevating the rich and powerful above the poor and disenfranchised within this new community:

> Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:25–28, NIV; emphasis, mine)

Jesus' parables, acts of mercy, and examples of leadership reaffirmed humanity, dignity and belonging of the community of socioeconomically disenfranchised in God's Kingdom, and not just as objects but as those with agency. From the leaders to the members of the newly forming communities of faith, he relocated them from the exclusionary fringes of secular and religious society to the center of inclusion and belonging in God's story of salvation and redemption.

The Presence of the Affluent in God's Mission

Yet the abundant biblical narratives of empowerment of and ministry through the socioeconomically disenfranchised do not necessarily mean an absence of place for the affluent, rich, and privileged persons and communities in God's story. Instead, it points us to how God expects followers of Yeshua and spiritually healthy communities to handle wealth: by sharing it with the poor (as Yeshua did), so that none lack what is needed to thrive individually and communally in the community of God's people. This was the understanding that formulated the socioeconomic dynamic of the Acts 2 church—a church where everyone brought and shared their worldly goods for the purpose of attaining sufficiency and sustenance for all.

The Apostle Paul's teachings and ministry carried on this practice by requesting and receiving financial donations from more affluent worshiping communities for the benefit of less affluent communities. This reveals the paradigmatic relationship of coexistence between the affluent and the not-so-affluent in the community of Yeshua's followers. In the second chapter of the Epistle of James, James provides communities of faith practical examples of how the rich and not-so-rich should coexist. He further instructs the newly forming and existing churches to refrain from practices that elevate the rich above the poor, as this would constitute an aberration of what it means to participate in God's mission through Christ:

> Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong? (James 2:5–7, NIV)

It would be well understood, therefore, that what it means to form and be a Christian community is to uphold the biblical tradition of centering the empowerment of socioeconomically disenfranchised communities for ministry and full participation in God's mission on earth. The biblical witness—from God's call of a childless couple in Genesis, to the Exodus formation of Israel as a liberated slave people, to the birth of the Messiah in a stable, to the early church's composition of the "foolish," "weak," and "despised" of the world—does not depict socioeconomic disenfranchisement as an obstacle to be overcome before ministry can occur, but as a privileged location from which God's power and presence are revealed. When denominations and church-planting strategies

ignore or invert this logic, they risk silencing the very voices that might most faithfully interpret the gospel in a world marked by inequality and exclusion.

Theological Rationale

Classical missiology and a missional church paradigm

Michael Goheen's *A Light to the Nations* offers a robust biblical-theological framework for understanding the church's purpose as intrinsically missional. He traces God's mission (missio Dei) through redemptive history, highlighting that the church is not a static institution, but a community sent into the world to testify to God's covenant faithfulness and to embody the coming kingdom. In *The Church and Its Vocation,* Goheen supports his claim by referencing Lesslie Newbigin's argument that "mission is not first of all an action of ours. It is an action of God, the triune God…"[107] For churches emerging from marginalized contexts, this missional identity invites a dynamic participation in God's narrative that is both contextually grounded and theologically rich. This framework challenges dominant, institutional notions of church growth that prioritize numerical expansion or financial stability. Instead, Goheen emphasizes faithfulness to the gospel story, where missional communities often begin at the margins and among those excluded from societal power. He argues that being an effective witness in one's neighborhood and culture requires a missional stance—a posture of listening, learning, and humble service that embodies God's kingdom now. Michael Goheen's missional theology frames Christian witness as a holistic participation in God's mission through life, word, and deed. In *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, Goheen resists separating evangelism from

[107] Michael W. Goheen, The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 71.

embodied practices of mercy, justice, and everyday vocation, arguing that the church's mission involves being, doing, and speaking the witness of the gospel. Evangelism, therefore, is not merely verbal proclamation detached from context; it requires attentiveness to the heartfelt needs of one's neighbors and discernment of the cultural idolatries that shape human life. Likewise, holistic mission calls congregations to resist self-enclosure and to become visibly present in their neighborhoods through self-giving service, so that the good news overflows into concrete practices of justice, mercy, and neighborly care. Goheen further situates this witness within what he calls a "missionary encounter with culture," a posture that neither rejects culture wholesale nor accommodates it uncritically but engages it dialogically—embracing what is creationally good while resisting idolatrous distortion. Thus, effective Christian witness in one's neighborhood and culture requires a missional posture of listening, learning, humble service, contextual discernment, and embodied participation in the life of God's kingdom.[108] This articulation anticipates and models the lived experience of marginalized church planters who creatively nurture community and leadership in resource-poor settings.

Similarly, George R. Hunsberger's *The Story That Chooses Us* builds on narrative theology to explore how church planting is not merely an organizational activity but an expression of being called into a particular story. From such locus, church planting cannot merely be rendered as an organizational or strategic activity, but a rather ecclesial response to being claimed by the biblical story of God's mission. For Hunsberger, missional identity is not a programmatic layer added to congregational life; rather, it is the narrative

---

[108] Michael W. Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History and Issues* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 227–64, especially "Authentic Evangelism," "Mercy and Justice," and "Calling of Believers in Society"; see also 296–316, especially "Missionary Encounter with Culture: The Faithful Posture of the Church."

framework within which the church receives God's word, discerns its calling, and lives as a witness within the world, and missional identity is not an add-on program but the narrative within which the community hears God's word and lives it out.[109] This narrative focus underscores the importance of cultural context, relational history, and communal memory in shaping how a congregation understands its mission. Hunsberger further provocatively argues that the story in which we find our identity is not a neutral backdrop but the formative force that chooses us and determines our capacity for mission.[110] Thus, for disenfranchised Black congregations, interpretation and articulation of their own stories—as grounded in faith and shaped by their unique social realities—become acts of both resistance and affirmation. Hunsberger's critique of institutional church growth strategies as often being disconnected from the narrative reality of marginalized communities builds on the argument that missional effectiveness arises from a deep congruence between the story a community lives and the missional call it receives.[111] Thus, church planting must be understood not merely as institutional expansion but as participation in God's mission. This insight validates the research's aim to surface and uphold indigenous leadership and church planting models that might diverge from dominant denominational frameworks but embody the gospel authentically.

Together, the missiological insights of Goheen and Hunsberger enrich this research's theological foundation by situating marginalized church planting within the broader biblical story of God's sending and the formative power of communal narrative.

---

[109] George R. Hunsberger, *The Story That Chooses Us: A Tapestry of Missional Vision*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015)
[110] Hunsberger, *The Story That Chooses Us*, 42
[111] Ibid., 57

Their works invite a reimagining of church vitality that emphasizes faithfulness, contextual embodiment, and Spirit-led witness rooted in the lived stories of diverse communities.

Postcolonial and liberation theology

Willie James Jennings offers one of the most penetrating critiques of colonialism's impact on Christian formation and identity. In *The Christian Imagination*, Jennings argues that colonialism transformed Christian imagination by racializing theology around whiteness, producing a "distorted education" that alienated Black and Indigenous bodies from the church.[112] This education divorced Christian teaching from embodied communal experience, prioritizing abstract rationality and Eurocentric norms over local spiritualities and knowledge. In *After Whiteness*, Jennings further reveals how Christian institutions act as disciplinary bodies that cultivate a normative subject: the "self-sufficient white male," marginalizing alternative identities and epistemologies.[113] He laments that Western education often forms leaders in mastery and control, rather than humility and mutuality, effectively perpetuating exclusion within church leadership.[114] Jennings's call for decolonizing theological education is essential for enabling marginalized churches to flourish authentically. He advocates a pedagogical "unlearning of whiteness" to foster theological and ecclesial formation that embraces diverse experiences and gifts.[115] His work discloses the systemic challenges confronting marginalized church planting and insists on Spirit-led reimagination of Christian belonging and leadership.

---

[112] Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 40–43, 52.
[113] Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), 38–44.
[114] Ibid., 44
[115] Ibid., 52

Feminist theological frameworks

Letty M. Russell's *Church in the Round* offers a foundational feminist ecclesiology rooted in the biblical image of the church as a communal, participatory body—an "ecclesial round table" where all are called into dialogue, leadership, and mutual service.[116] Russell critiques hierarchical, patriarchal models that have historically marginalized women and oppressed groups, emphasizing instead the biblical call to an inclusive community where 'the last are first,' and all voices are heard.[117] She posits that the church's primary theological task is embodying this participatory and egalitarian model, which aligns with the prophetic witness of marginalized communities, especially those historically silenced or excluded. Russell's critique of ecclesiastical hierarchy and her advocacy for participatory ecclesiology serve as a theological foundation for marginalized church planting. Her vision calls the church to be "a community of mutual transformation," where relationships are theologically central—divinely rooted acts of fidelity rather than mere social constructs.[118]

Similarly, Kwok Pui-lan's *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* critically examines how colonial histories, racialized economies, and gendered oppressions have shaped theologies and ecclesial practices, often marginalizing Asian, Black, and Indigenous voices.[119] She asserts that "theologies rooted in coloniality continue to inform Western church practices, silencing expressions of faith that emerge from postcolonial, decolonized contexts."[120] Kwok advocates a "decolonizing theology," which involves

---

[116] Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 52.
[117] Russell, *Church in the Round*, 58.
[118] Ibid., 59
[119] Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 7.
[120] Ibid., 37

listening to the suppressed stories of colonized peoples, elevating indigenous spiritualities, and claiming a pluriversal understanding of the divine.[121] Her work challenges Western ecclesial norms that treat existing structures as universal, urging a liberative vision where communities—particularly marginalized Black churches—articulate their own theological and ecclesial identities. Kwok's work underscores that postcolonial feminist theology is not merely critique but an act of reclamation. Thus, fostering a new ecclesial imagination where leadership and community are rooted in the lived realities of the oppressed.[122] This aligns with the overarching goal of this research: to uplift marginalized communities, empowering them to shape their own ecclesial identities and participate fully in God's mission.

A robust biblical foundation for marginalized leadership in church planting is crucial for this research. Holly J. Carey's *Women Who Do: Female Disciples in the Gospels* contributes significantly to reclaiming the theological and ecclesial roles of women, especially in leadership and mission, thereby affirming a broader biblical vision of inclusion and participation. Carey challenges traditional readings that marginalize female disciples and instead highlight the active and essential role women played in the early Christian movement. She asserts that, "Women's presence, witness, and leadership are integrally woven into the fabric of the gospel narrative—no less critical than that of the male disciples."[123] Carey's exegetical work on key biblical texts demonstrates how female disciples not only received the resurrection message but were among the first to proclaim

---

[121] Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 45
[122] Ibid., 66.
[123] Holly J. Carey, *Women Who Do: Female Disciples in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2023), 89.

it, situating them as apostles and foundational witnesses (Mark 16:1–8; John 20:11–18). Their courageous testimony functions as a theological affirmation that leadership in the Christian community transcends gender and social status, echoing the inclusive ethos central to the gospel mission. Further enriching this argument, Old Testament ecclesiology reveals God's concern for the marginalized and vulnerable as co-participants in covenant community. The prophetic tradition foregrounds justice, righteousness, and inclusion (Micah 6:8; Isaiah 58), shaping the identity and mission of God's people. Women, widows, and the disenfranchised play crucial roles in these narratives, which emphasize a community built on mutual care and justice rather than privilege and exclusion. The New Testament continues this trajectory by portraying the ecclesia as a countercultural community embodying God's reign through diverse membership and mutual service (1 Corinthians 12:12–31), with no distinction based on ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status (Galatians 3:28). Paul underscores this radical inclusion: "For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith" (Gal 3:26). Moreover, the Pentecostal experience in Acts exemplifies Spirit-empowered inclusivity where diverse believers—including women, Gentiles, and marginalized persons—are empowered for ministry and mission (Acts 2:17-18, 21:8-9). This pneumatological dynamic continually refocuses contemporary churches on Spirit-led diversity and inclusion. This biblical and theological grounding affirms that marginalized leadership in church planting is rooted in Scripture's persistent call for justice and radical inclusion, supported by divine empowerment through the Spirit to embody Christ's mission in diverse contexts.

Sociological and practical theological insights

John McKnight and Peter Block's work in *The Abundant Community* offers a paradigm-shifting perspective on sustainability within marginalized congregations by highlighting the power of relational and social capital over traditional measures of financial wealth and institutional resources. They argue that the more abundant a community is in actual, tangible relationships—the webs of friendship, trust, and reciprocity—the more likely it is to be able to weather economic shocks and social vulnerabilities.[124] For marginalized Black church plants, this insight clarifies why relational cohesion and mutual care often serve as lifelines, embodying the biblical vision of community as expressed in Acts 2:42–47. Their research allows for the deduction that the effectiveness of congregational sustainability is less about the acquisition of capital in the conventional sense and more about the foundational 'abundance of relationships which enable families and neighbors to thrive together.'[125] This deduction aligns closely with Pentecostal understandings of the Spirit-infused community, where power and vitality arise from spiritual kinship and collective empowerment, rather than institutional affluence.

Amos Yong's *Hospitality and the Other* provides complementary pneumatological and theological resources to ground this relational model in Spirit-led practice. Drawing on the Lukan pneumatology of Michael Welker, Vanhoozer's doctoral advisor, he argues for a "Pentecostal plurality" in which Spirit-enabled communities are empowered to cross barriers of race, class, and culture through divine hospitality.[126] This hospitality is not

---

[124] John McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010), 122.
[125] Ibid., 135
[126] Amos Yong, Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 55-59.

merely social courtesy but a radical theological act that embodies Christ's mission through concrete practices of welcome and inclusion. Yong elaborates that this hospitality is made possible through the Spirit's dynamic presence, which uproots exclusionary practices and fosters a genuine otherness that sustains communal identity in diversity.[127] For Black church plants operating in contexts where social and cultural margins intersect with economic scarcity, this pneumatological hospitality provides a model for sustaining ministry through inclusive, Spirit-led communal practices that resist and transcend systemic marginalization.

Together, the sociological emphasis on relational abundance by McKnight and Block and the theological framing of Spirit-enabled hospitality by Yong create a robust, interdisciplinary foundation for understanding how marginalized churches sustain and flourish. Their insights invigorate this study's theological rationale by demonstrating that vitality in marginalized church planting is inseparable from networks of interpersonal trust and Spirit-mediated hospitality that affirm belonging and mission beyond conventional institutional paradigms.

Toward a Theology of Marginalized Leadership

As established in the previous chapter and in the foregoing discussion, contrary to the overarching models and messages of Scripture, Western Christianity has postulated and embodied a theology and practice of formation of worshiping communities in which the rich and affluent are the hosts of the message of salvation, and the poor and

[127] Yong, *Hospitality and the Other*, 105-110

disenfranchised are occasional guests. In addition, Justo L. González traces the Romano-Greco philosophies of wealth and their interplay with (biblical) Judaic and early Christian practices of hospitality and generosity, and how despite church's becoming increasingly aligned with the powerful post-Constantine, the faithful Christian attitude advocated for the wealthy to share their abundance with the poor[128] Willie James Jennings similarly identifies how Western Christian imagination, formed during the colonial era, has privileged whiteness, property, and affluence in its organizational structures and theological imagination, systematically marginalizing voices from the periphery.[129] Jennings further exposes the idolatry and ideology of the "self-sufficient white male" in his work *After Whiteness*—an archetype of mastery, control, and possession that has profoundly shaped Western education and ecclesiastical formation.[130] He argues this ideal is not solely racial but a cognitive and affective structure that permeates institutions and individuals, silencing other ways of knowing and belonging. Lesslie Newbigin argues that the Western church must recover the gospel as a missionary challenge to its own culture rather than allowing Christianity to function as a religious legitimation of Western social, political, and economic arrangements. In *Foolishness to the Greeks*, Newbigin contends that the gospel confronts the assumptions of Western culture precisely as the "foolishness" of God, exposing the limits of worldly wisdom, power, and affluence. Thus, where the church confuses the gospel with the preservation of social order or the interests of the powerful, it abandons the cruciform logic by which God's truth is disclosed from the side of the powerless rather than from the standpoint of those

---

[128] Justo L. González, Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 225–28.
[129] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 6–8, 122–30, 175–76.
[130] Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 6–9.

who wield power.[131] This theological captivity leaves little room for the expression of faith and participation in God's mission by the poor. Like other forms of discrimination in the church—including but not limited to sexism, racism, and homophobia—it perpetuates the assumption and false ideology that God and the Gospel of Christ are only fully embodied and transmitted through men, white and heterosexual voices.

The biblical, postcolonial, feminist, and missional perspectives surveyed in this chapter converge in a constructive proposal: marginalized leadership is not an optional corrective to ecclesial imbalance but a central expression of the church's participation in the life of the triune God. In this study, "marginalized leadership" refers to the Spirit-empowered, theologically grounded, and publicly recognized leadership of those who inhabit social, racial, economic, gendered, or cultural locations historically pushed to the edges of ecclesial life—particularly within Black congregations shaped by the legacies of enslavement, segregation, and ongoing racialized injustice. Rather than functioning as symbolic diversity or rhetorical inclusion, such leadership names the concrete authority, agency, and discernment exercised by people whose voices have often been silenced or instrumentalized by dominant Western ecclesial paradigms. This definition is intentionally contextual, recognizing that the contours of marginalization are not abstract but emerge at the intersection of local histories, structures, and identities.

This theological framing grows directly from the scriptural witness and theological critiques explored above. Carey's retrieval of women as indispensable witnesses and leaders in the gospel narratives, the Old and New Testament's sustained concern for justice and inclusion, and the Pentecostal vision of Spirit-empowered participation collectively

---

[131] Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 124–45, especially 125.

testify that leadership in the people of God is not restricted to socially dominant bodies. Likewise, Jennings's analysis of whiteness as a malformed Christian imagination, Russell's round-table ecclesiology, Kwok's postcolonial feminist reclamation of silenced voices, and Goheen and Hunsberger's missional paradigms all uncover the ways dominant ecclesial forms have suppressed or distorted the leadership of those at the margins. In light of these converging witnesses, this study contends that the church most faithfully embodies its vocation when those historically relegated to the periphery are recognized and equipped as central bearers of the community's discernment, proclamation, and practice. Marginalized leadership, then, is not merely the subject of this project; it is the primary lens through which the church's identity, mission, and vitality are interpreted.

Theological Framework for Reorientation

In light of the foregoing, this project will draw from theological resources that help introduce nontraditional and underprivileged voices and demographics into church planting by refocusing biblical models of church planting on four main pillars of the two worshiping communities of the study. These pillars being broadly present in all churches, will help tell the stories of church planting in marginalized communities such as Aliquippa community, and provide an interpretive framework for understanding church planting by the socioeconomically disenfranchised. They are:

1. **Purpose or mission**
2. **Leadership formation**
3. **Membership formation**
4. **Sustainability**

2.1. Purpose or mission of the church

A central theological question underlying this project concerns the *purpose and mission* of the church: What is the church, and toward what end is it gathered? Edwin Chr. van Driel's Ephesians-based article "To Be Gathered Is To Be Sent" in the collection *New Worshiping Communities: A Theological Exploration* offers a crucial starting point and basis for introducing and exploring other theological voices about the church and its mission. Reading Ephesians pneumatologically, van Driel argues that the church's being sent into the world is inseparable from its being gathered by the Spirit. The church is not first an institution that decides to undertake a mission; rather, it is a people called together by the Spirit and constituted as a worshiping community, and precisely in that gathering, it is propelled outward in participation in the missio Dei. Mission is thus not an optional activity but the very mode of the church's existence. Van Driel's article helps locate the mission of a church in the Holy Spirit's work of gathering and sending, the former of which is critical for understanding church planting. Van Driel argues that the church's being sent out into the world to participate in God's mission through the Spirit's work occurs by the *gathering* of a people to form a worshiping community.[132]

This pneumatological grounding is amplified in Jürgen Moltmann's *The Church in the Power of the Spirit,* where the church is described as a messianic fellowship formed by the Spirit for participation in the coming reign of God. Moltmann resists any reduction of the church to a voluntary association or a provider of religious goods and instead situates it within the eschatological movement of God toward liberation and renewal. The Spirit creates a community that anticipates the future of God in its present

---

[132] Edwin Chr. van Driel, "To Be Gathered Is to Be Sent," unpublished manuscript, 47–48, accessed October 25, 2026, https://www.academia.edu/18517370/To_Be_Gathered_Is_To_Be_Sent.

practices. Such framing destabilizes models of church planting that prioritize institutional replication or numerical growth detached from embodied witness among the vulnerable. Lesslie Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology further clarifies this orientation. In *Foolishness to the Greeks*, Newbigin contends that the church exists as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the kingdom within a particular culture. It does not possess the gospel; it is possessed by it. George R. Hunsberger's interpretation of Newbigin underscores that the church's mission arises from the Spirit's calling rather than from institutional strategy. If the church's mission is to participate in God's gathering and sending work within the world, then the question of leadership becomes inseparable from the forms of persons and practices through which that mission is discerned, embodied, and sustained.

2.2. Leadership formation

This study argues that leadership formation in marginalized church plants is best understood through relational, servant, and Spirit-led models of communal life rather than through frameworks centered primarily on formal credentialing, institutional power, or dominant ecclesial status. Several theological voices help illuminate this claim.

(i) Holly J. Carey's work on female disciples in the Gospels is especially important for recovering biblical models of leadership that exceed patriarchal assumptions. Carey argues that women's presence, witness, and leadership are integrally woven into the gospel narratives and should therefore inform contemporary ecclesial understandings of discipleship and authority. Her work challenges readings that implicitly limit leadership to male apostles or formal officeholders and instead demonstrates that women's obedience, discernment, and public witness are indispensable

to the formation and continuation of God's people. This insight is critical for marginalized church contexts, where women's labor often sustains congregational life even when it is not formally recognized as leadership.[133] It is a disservice to both the church and the world to ignore the prevalent narratives of women's role in the story of the formation of God's people and in the great story of salvation - the incarnation. Yeshua's Old Testament origins and New Testament existence heavily lies on the obedience and courageous acts of women like Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, Deborah, Esther, Mary, mother of Yeshua, and Mary Magdalene, just to name a few (Matthew 1:1-16). Women's work is deeply ingrained in the successful establishment of both the Judaic and Christian salvation story. Yet, they are not often talked about or even prescribed as good examples of what it means to model faithful Christian living. Holly attributes this exclusion to the gender-discriminating practice of translating and interpreting 'disciples' as strictly male, masculine and limited to the twelve apostles.[134] I second her arguments with my own that the church actively rests on the backs of women's work, which although portrayed as 'service'[135] is really leadership.

(ii) Letty M. Russell's *Church In The Round* provides a complementary ecclesiological framework by imagining the church as a participatory community gathered at Christ's table rather than as a hierarchy organized around exclusion and control. Using the metaphor of the 'round table' as the center for this gathering, she argues that the table at which the church gathers is the "eucharistic table"[136] that serves

---

[133] Holly J. Carey, Women Who Do: Female Disciples in the Gospels (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2023), ix.
[134] Ibid., 3.
[135] Ibid., 55.
[136] Ibid., 17.

the dual purpose of signifying commitment to Christ as well as welcoming all who Christ has welcomed and which includes women. Russell's discourse of connecting with the margins is based on Christ's own work of connecting with the excluded and the marginalized. Therefore, faithfulness to continue Christ's ministry must of necessity, actively model and reflect this ongoing gathering and centering of marginalized demographics. She hones on Carey's identification of women's work as 'service' and sharpens it further to illustrate it as 'leadership:' "Service is the key form of life to any follower of Christ, and one of the many ways to serve is as a leader in the church. Whether one is ordained or not ceases to be the issue; the question becomes one of the style of leadership behavior that is most helpful to congregations in their particular contexts."[137] Russell argues that service is not opposed to leadership but is one of its primary forms within Christian community. Her emphasis on shared leadership, contextual participation, and the full inclusion of those historically relegated to the margins offers an important theological corrective to ecclesial systems that benefit from women's labor while withholding corresponding recognition of women's authority.[138] Within this framework, leadership is not limited to ordination or formal office, but is discerned in practices that sustain the life, witness, and mutuality of the congregation. Russell wastes no time trying to prove whether or not women are 'leaders;' to her it is a given. What remains therefore is the reframing and re-organizing of the church's structure and operations to effectively reflect women's leadership as those who sit at Yeshua's eucharistic table. This argument augments Carey's argument to center women's

[137] Russell, *Church in the Round,* 56.
[138] Ibid., 12.

work as examples of discipleship in and to the church and function prescriptively for the church.

Russell's metaphor of the 'round table' becomes even more important when we consider church and society's activism towards decolonization. Kwok Pui-lan's *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology* echoes what every woman of color in ministry knows to be true: even while rightly focused on deconstructing colonialism, the church has not only often left out the gender dimension but also ignored the role that religion plays in sustaining colonial ideologies and its connections to marginalizing women's voices.[139] Thus, if the church will effectively combat colonialism and its pervasive racial discrimination, it will need to examine the role that the church plays in upholding misogyny as an integral component of its religious practices and beliefs. Her postcolonial feminist theology demonstrates that decolonizing the church requires more than racial inclusion; it also requires confronting the gendered assumptions embedded within Christian institutions and theological discourse. Kwok's work is particularly relevant to this study because it highlights how voices and practices emerging from marginalized contexts are often excluded not because they lack theological substance, but because they do not conform to dominant Western and patriarchal expectations of legitimacy.

(iii) Willie James Jennings likewise exposes how Christian formation in the West has been shaped by what he calls the distorted imagination of whiteness, property, and mastery. In both *The Christian Imagination* and *After Whiteness*, Jennings critiques educational and ecclesial systems that normalize the self-sufficient, controlling subject as

---

[139] Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 7–8.

the implicit model of leadership. His critique helps clarify why forms of leadership grounded in communal dependence, contextual wisdom, and Spirit-led discernment are often misrecognized or undervalued within dominant institutional frameworks. Read alongside Lesslie Newbigin's concern that the church in the modern West has too often confused the gospel with the maintenance of social and cultural power, Jennings's work supports a theological reorientation in which leadership is measured not by institutional dominance but by faithful participation in God's mission.

Taken together, these voices support a constructive account of leadership formation that is central to this study. Leadership in marginalized congregations is not simply the possession of formal authority by recognized officeholders; it is often formed through service, discernment, relational trust, and embodied participation in the life of the community. Women's leadership, in particular, emerges as a crucial site for theological rethinking because it frequently sustains ministry in practice even when it remains structurally underrecognized. This study therefore approaches leadership formation not as the replication of dominant ecclesial models, but as the cultivation and recognition of Spirit-enabled capacities already present within communities shaped by racialized and economic marginalization. My own ministry experience confirms the stakes of this theological question, though it is not the primary evidence for the argument developed here. As a woman called into ministry within ecclesial environments where women's leadership was often treated as anomalous or suspect, I encountered the same disjunction identified by Carey, Russell, Kwok, and Jennings: women's work was welcomed when framed as service but resisted when recognized as authority. That tension reinforces the importance of examining leadership formation in marginalized congregations through

theological frameworks capable of recognizing forms of leadership that dominant ecclesial systems have too often ignored, appropriated, or silenced.

2.3. Membership formation

In this study, I argue that membership formation in marginalized congregations cannot be reduced to formal enrollment, program participation, or financial contribution. Rather, belonging is cultivated through shared life, mutual care, and durable presence under conditions of socioeconomic constraint. The impact of socioeconomic pressures on marginalized bodies makes them naturally resistant to further systems of compulsion and because the church in marginalized communities serves as an oasis where the weary may find rest for their souls, the freedom of the individual is highly respected. As Bishop Moreland noted in his interview, “the community flows into the church and the church flows back into the community.”[140] However this respect for individual freedom, though heightened in marginalized communities, is not unbiblical. Yeshua’s own ministry operated by freewill association rather than regimented, militaristic codes of belonging. Belonging functions as an outcome of feeling safe and welcome in a church community. Rev. Rick and Vera Shymoniak of Sound the Alarm Ministries spoke of how they “welcome all, regardless of your denomination or background, we don’t care” and “even to this day, we don't have a membership role. People can join the church, but we don't have a list like Sister Johnson is a member. Yeah, we don't do that. You become a part of the church.” Whereas Refreshing Springs Ministry kept a list, it was more so that I could provide pastoral care when needed.

---

[140] Moreland Interview.

Lesslie Newbigin's *The Household of God: Letters on the Nature of the Church* offers an ecclesiological lens that deepens the theological grounding of membership formation in marginalized congregations. In this early yet enduring work, Newbigin presents the church as fundamentally a 'household'—a living communion brought into being by the triune God rather than a voluntary association organized around shared interests. By drawing on Trinitarian imagery, he resists purely institutional or purely experiential accounts of belonging and instead frames membership as incorporation into a reconciled community constituted by Word, sacrament, and Spirit. The church, as a household, is not defined by socioeconomic homogeneity or cultural dominance but by participation in the life of Christ. This vision is particularly significant for socioeconomically disenfranchised Black church plants where membership cannot be predicated on affluence, property ownership, or institutional prestige. Newbigin's insistence that the church is a visible, embodied fellowship—called to live as a sign of God's reconciled humanity—clarifies that belonging entails mutual accountability, shared discipline, and common witness. Membership, therefore, is not passive affiliation but covenantal participation in a community that reflects the triune life of God in the midst of the world. In contexts marked by racialization and economic marginalization, the metaphor of household challenges exclusionary ecclesial norms and affirms that those historically relegated to the periphery are, in fact, full participants at God's table.

2.4 Sustainability

In determining factors that detract from or contribute to *sustainability* of church plants in marginalized communities, I assert that sustainability is achieved through theological and relational frameworks that differ significantly from dominant institutional

assumptions. Rather than being defined primarily by financial self-sufficiency, numerical growth, or organizational stability, sustainability in these contexts is often expressed through relational interdependence, faithful presence, and ongoing participation in God's work amid conditions of constraint. Although brought about by necessity in marginalized black communities, this pattern of mutuality of care and interdependence is central to the Triune life of God. Lesslie Newbigin ecclesiology in *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church*, challenges models of the church that rely on institutional strength or social dominance, emphasizing instead that the church's life is constituted by its participation in the triune life of God and its witness within particular contexts. This perspective suggests that sustainability cannot be reduced to institutional viability alone, but must be understood in relation to the church's faithfulness to its calling within specific communities. For Newbigin, the church's continuity does not depend primarily upon sociological strength or organizational efficiency, but upon its participation in the life and mission of the Triune God. Sustainability, therefore, is the *faithful embodiment of a divine reality* rather than the maintenance of an organization. Newbigin resists reducing the church to either a voluntary association sustained by human effort or a purely invisible spiritual fellowship detached from historical form. The church exists as a visible, local, and embodied community that derives its identity from its incorporation into Christ. This theological grounding is critical for marginalized Black churches whose sustainability is often evaluated through external metrics of size, capital, or cultural influence. Newbigin's vision reframes *endurance as fidelity rather than expansion*. The church remains sustainable insofar as it remains a living household shaped by baptismal incorporation, Eucharistic communion, and Spirit-led witness. In contexts marked by

racialized marginalization and economic instability, such a framework resists despair by locating ecclesial durability in covenantal belonging to God rather than in market success. Thus, Newbigin strengthens the theological foundation of this study's claim that sustainability is first ecclesiological before it is strategic.

Samuel Wells takes this further in his church incarnation model of 'being with' God and one another in Nazareth in his *A Nazareth Manifesto*. Wells reframes Christian community as fundamentally characterized by "being with" rather than "working for" or to a lesser degree "working with." For Wells, the church's primary vocation is not primarily to solve problems or manage outcomes, but to cultivate enduring relationships characterized by presence, accompaniment, and mutual belonging with God in the world."[141] Sustainability, in this framework, is not achieved through strategic expansion, managerial efficiency, or institutional metrics, but through relational embeddedness and sustained communion with God and neighbor. Wells contends that much contemporary ministry has been negatively shaped by paternalistic paradigms of 'working for' and 'doing for' approaches that center activism, solutions, and outcomes. By contrast, he insists that being with is not simply a technique for mission; it is the heart of God's purpose for the world, "while there is a place for working for, working with, and being for, it is being with that is the most faithful form of Christian witness and mission, because being with is both incarnationally faithful to the manifestation of God in Christ and eschatologically anticipatory of the destiny of all things in God.[142] This claim relocates ecclesial vitality from performance to presence. The church endures not because it accomplishes tasks efficiently, but because it participates in the life of God. Yet, he

[141] Samuel Wells, A Nazareth Manifesto: Being With God (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 2.
[142] Ibid., 15.

argues that "being with" should, just as importantly, be the goal of "working with."" Theologically, this model resonates with the Johannine metaphor of the vine and branches (John 15), in which fruitfulness emerges from abiding connection. Wells argues that the incarnation is not God doing things to or for humanity, but God being with humanity, "God's fundamental purpose to be with us - not primarily to rescue us, or even empower us, but simply to be with us, to share our existence, to enjoy our hopes and fears, our delights and griefs, our triumphs and and disasters."[143] Just as a child receives nourishment and formation through sustained attachment within the womb, so the church receives sustenance through abiding in Christ. Life does not flow from proximity to wealth or institutional leverage, but from communion. Sustainability, therefore, is theological before it is organizational. This theological claim carries particular weight in marginalized Black ecclesial contexts where material capital is often constrained. Wells warns that the dominant "doing for" model can unintentionally reinforce hierarchy because when Christians imagine their task as working for others, they subtly retain control, "The notion of for assumes imbalance, assumes a gesture of goodness that disadvantages the one to benefit the other."[144] Such a posture risks replicating paternalistic dynamics even when intentions are benevolent. In contrast, "being with" in conjunction with "doing with" redistributes power by emphasizing mutuality and shared vulnerability.[145] This emphasis on relational proximity reframes sustainability as the capacity to remain faithfully present with communities over time, even in the absence of abundant material resources.

---

[143] Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto,* 24.
[144] Ibid., 230.
[145] Ibid*.,* 116

Wells later situates Nazareth as an 'abundant community' in a way that resonates with John McKnight and Peter Block's account of neighborhoods that work not from scarcity but from the gifts present within their community. I read Wells as more skeptical than McKnight and Block about the long-term viability of formal voluntary associations. McKnight and Block use 'associations' to describe any way that neighbors' gifts are brought together for the common good, whether formally organized or loosely gathered. By contrast, Wells worries that once associations become organized and funded, they are easily drawn into administrative and sustainability pressures that turn them into instruments of doing for rather than being with socially disadvantaged neighborhoods.[146] In predominantly Black, economically distressed communities such as Aliquippa however, the problem is often not that 'money' distorts associations but that significant external funding is largely absent and social disenfranchisement persists over decades. In such contexts, the kinds of associations McKnight and Block describe often remain small-scale, relational, and deeply interdependent and thus closer to Wells's ideal of 'being with' than his majority white, Norwich example might suggest. This difference in how poverty and race intersect is one reason I argue that the voices and practices of racially and socially marginalized communities must be included in these conversations; otherwise, experiences drawn from one demographic risk being generalized in ways that further obscure the agency and witness of the others.

Despite the validity of the foregoing argument, money is important and if it is important and marginalized communities do not have much of it, how do their communities and churches thrive and survive? From my experience of planting

---

[146] Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto* 257.

Refreshing Springs Ministry and living in Aliquippa for almost two decades, I identified a commitment to *radical hospitality* as a major pillar of both community and church sustainability. The interchange and network of goods and services keeps both our churches and community alive. Amos Yong's *Hospitality and the Other's* theology of hospitality further extends this framework by emphasizing the importance of openness to the "other" as a core Christian practice. Yong argues that hospitality is not merely an optional virtue, but a theological necessity grounded in the Spirit's work of drawing diverse people into shared life. In racially and socially marginalized congregations, practices of hospitality often function as key mechanisms of sustainability, creating spaces of belonging and mutual support that enable communities to endure despite structural limitations. This culture of radical hospitality functions as a survival ethic within marginalized Black communities. In Aliquippa's Black community in particular, radical hospitality is not aspirational, it is structural. It is an identifying marker shaped by generations of socioeconomic deprivation, racial exclusion, and systemic neglect. There exists within the community a shared—both conscious and subconscious—awareness of scarcity. Yet rather than result in isolation and individualism, this awareness produces circulation and community. Financial resources, social capital, childcare, transportation, informal counseling, and vocational knowledge are shared as a matter of communal responsibility. This is how the community survives. Radical hospitality in this context does not function as charity but as *covenantal obligation*, echoing the biblical mandate: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field… Leave them for the poor and the foreigner" (Leviticus 19:9–10, NIV). Bishop Moreland's assertion that "somebody has to take responsibility, and we have to take responsibility

because there's nobody other than us around" captures this theological posture. It resonates deeply with Yeshua's command in the feeding narrative: "You give them something to eat" (Mark 6:37, NIV; cf. Matthew 14:16). Yeshua's disciples were not instructed to outsource responsibility. Rather, they were commanded to embody provision. In marginalized communities, this command is lived, not merely preached: people look for the resources within themselves and provide from what they have and from what is around them.

Yong expands the theological grounding for such ecclesial sustainability by framing hospitality as a pneumatological practice. Yong argues that Christian hospitality is not merely social inclusion but participation in the Spirit's boundary-crossing work. Drawing from Pentecost (Acts 2), he contends that the Spirit disrupts homogeneity and forms communities marked by linguistic, cultural, and social differences. A sustainable Christian community, therefore, is not built upon sameness or institutional insulation but upon Spirit-enabled openness to the "other." For marginalized Black churches, this insight is significant: sustainability cannot be reduced to financial solvency or numerical stability, but must be understood as Spirit-generated resilience rooted in radical welcome and relational permeability. Although somewhat closed off to the outsider (non-Aliquippans), such is the kind of radical welcome and relational permeability that the Aliquippa Black community shares with one another. However, the tight-knittedness of the Aliquippa black community makes sense when one considers Yong's claim that authentic hospitality involves vulnerability and risk, since welcoming the other destabilizes control and predictability. For a community that is already dragged through the mud for its poverty and whose slightest misdeeds are inordinately highlighted by the

press, forming relationships with only those you know, and trust becomes critical and a survival skill. In economically strained and racially contested contexts such as Aliquippa, such Spirit-shaped hospitality is reflexive and becomes both countercultural and life-giving. It fosters networks of mutuality rather than scarcity-driven competition and redefines strength as relational interdependence. In this sense, Yong complements Wells' "being with" paradigm by demonstrating that durable presence is animated and sustained by the Holy Spirit's ongoing work of reconciling differences and empowering communities at the margins.

John McKnight and Peter Block's *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* further reframe sustainability away from institutional dependency and toward local asset-based capacity. Drawing from community organizing and asset-based community development, McKnight and Block argue that thriving communities do not emerge from professionalized service systems but from the gifts, skills, and relational networks already present among neighbors. They contend that communities are built by focusing on the capacities and gifts of the residents and associations that call a place home.[147] In this framework, sustainability is not secured through external funding streams alone, nor through top-down programmatic expansion, but through the activation of *indigenous leadershi*p and *reciprocal relationships*. For marginalized Black churches operating in economically disinvested contexts, this insight is critical. When churches adopt deficit-based narratives—seeing their neighborhoods primarily through the lens of need—they risk reinforcing dependency structures similar to those critiqued by Wells. By contrast, an asset-based posture recognizes congregants

[147] McKnight and Block, *The Abundant Community* 65–108.

and community members as bearers of skill, wisdom, cultural capital, and spiritual resilience. Such recognition fosters dignity, shared ownership, and long-term viability. McKnight and Block further argue that systems designed to serve communities often displace communal agency by centralizing power in institutions, "One major reason for the deactivation of our neighborhoods is that institutions often take as their own purpose what rightfully belongs in the hands of local citizens."[148] This critique parallels concerns about ecclesial models overly dependent on external resources or leadership, the kind that Wells argued remained a stranger even while 'doing for.' Within the framework of this study, McKnight and Block's work strengthens the claim that sustainability in marginalized Black churches do not primarily emerge from financial accumulation, but from relational density, local participation, and the mobilization of communal gifts. In this sense, abundance is not the absence of scarcity but the recognition of latent capacity within the neighborhood itself. Yet, one cannot recognize the latent capacity except one surrenders to the incarnational call to 'be with.' My surrender to this call despite the initial challenges of being the outsider resulted in the community being my teacher rather than the other way around. Through being with and getting to know them, I was equally awakened to the power of the imago Dei powerfully alive in and at work through them despite being surrounded by the negative markers associated with socioeconomically disenfranchised communities. Rather than confirm their shortcomings, my work revealed the remarkable gifts already present among children and youth who were operating within a positive ecosystem. What remained was the need to strengthen avenues for channeling those gifts. In this way, Refreshing Springs Ministry became a resource for

[148] McKnight and Block, *The Abundant Community,* 99.

parents and children by strengthening pathways for children and adults to participate in the *missio Dei*. The church does not bring the gifts. Instead, the church participates in affirming and supporting their God-given gifts, which in turn sustain community and the church.

Yet, God's Kingdom is not only reflected by the poor or poverty. So how do the rich participate in this? Justo L. González's *Faith and Wealth: A History of Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money*, traces the problematic development of Christian attitudes toward wealth through Greco-Roman and Jewish frameworks, revealing that classical Greco-Roman thought—particularly in Plato and Aristotle—often viewed wealth as a stabilizing mechanism for maintaining social order and hierarchy. Wealth functioned as a tool of governance and control, ordered toward preserving what was deemed a "just" society through structured inequality. In contrast, the Hebrew Scriptures embed wealth within covenantal responsibility. Levitical and Deuteronomic legislation assumes economic redistribution as integral to faithfulness. The sabbatical year (Deuteronomy 15), the Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25), and mandated gleaning practices reveal a theological vision in which accumulation is regularly interrupted for the sake of communal restoration. The Acts community emerges directly from this tradition. Luke describes the earliest believers as a community marked by shared life, economic redistribution, and practical care for those in need, "All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need."[149] Acts 2 was not a spontaneous economic innovation; it was Torah remembered through the lens of resurrection hope. If belief in Yeshua entails the renewal

[149] Acts 2:44–45, *New International Version*.

of the mind (Romans 12:2), then redeemed consciousness necessarily reconfigures one's relationship to wealth, property, and power. Economic life becomes aligned with divine intention rather than imperial logic. The early church's economic practices may thus be interpreted as participation in what might be called ***divine memory***—a recollection of Edenic abundance where access to provision was not restricted by domination or scarcity politics. However, in a world structured by racialized capitalism and systemic exclusion, access to abundance is unevenly distributed. Therefore, those who possess material and institutional prosperity bear theological responsibility, not as optional philanthropy; but as ***covenantal obedience***. Those who are prosperous ought to understand their wealth as a stewardship entrusted by God and accountable to God, neighbor, and self. They must therefore learn to cross constructed barriers—racial, economic, and institutional—in order to enact the community God intends, "especially [for] those who belong to the family of believers."[150] Crucially, such sharing must never dehumanize recipients but must preserve dignity and autonomy of the recipient, and refuse and reject saviorism and transactional control in the giver. Such generosity honors the image of God in those receiving support. Generosity, then, is not merely a cultural characteristic of marginalized Black churches but a theological corrective to distorted economic discipleship within affluent Christian communities. The question this raises for the church at large is not whether it gives but whether its giving reflects empire—or covenant.

Historical and sociopolitical realities put Black marginalized communities at risk. Therefore, such communities have learned to quickly adapt to many changing situations around them in order to stay safe and alive. Likewise, successful black churches in

---

[150] Galatians 6:10, *New International Version*.

marginalized communities should demonstrate the same skill. In Dwight J. Zscheile's *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Age of Uncertainty,* he contributes a missional and adaptive leadership framework to conversations about ecclesial sustainability in marginalized communities like Aliquippa. Writing within the context of institutional decline and cultural disruption, Zscheile argues that sustainability in the contemporary church cannot be secured through strategic planning alone but requires attentiveness to the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit. He contends that congregations must cultivate "agility"—the capacity to discern, experiment, and adapt in response to changing environments while remaining rooted in the gospel narrative. Unlike managerial models that prioritize control and predictability, Zscheile emphasizes practices of communal discernment, risk-taking, and theological imagination. Sustainability, therefore, is not preservation of inherited structures but participation in God's mission amid uncertainty.

Zscheile further critiques churches that cling to institutional stability at the expense of missional responsiveness, suggesting that such rigidity ultimately undermines long-term viability. In marginalized Black church contexts, particularly those operating within economically fragile and racially contested environments, agility is not optional but *existential*. These congregations often navigate fluctuating membership, limited financial resources, and systemic inequities. Zscheile's framework affirms that uncertainty need not signal decline; rather, it can become the arena in which Spirit-led innovation emerges. When paired with Wells' "being with" and Yong's pneumatological hospitality, agility is not reactive survivalism but Spirit-guided improvisation grounded in relational presence. In this way, *sustainability is reframed as faithful adaptability—*

remaining anchored in theological identity while dynamically responding to local realities. As I quickly discovered in the early years of Refreshing Springs Ministry, adaptation in both leadership style and church operations was not optional for ministry in Aliquippa's Black community. During the first year after launch, I realized that ministry as usual—shaped by my lifelong formation in high-church Anglican and Reformed traditions, as well as thriving Pentecostal church models—was not suited to the realities of a marginalized community in Aliquippa. I had to adapt quickly, and I had to continue adapting to the changing experiences and needs of the community. This adaptation included shifting from serving primarily adults and engaging children mainly through Sunday school, to serving children as a primary congregation while parents remained on the periphery; responding to the economic needs of church families by establishing and leading co-ops for adult members; and serving meals as part of every gathering in order to provide parents with respite. Refreshing Springs Ministry's sustainability was grounded in this high level of flexibility, and the resulting worshiping community revealed that God's Spirit is not welded to one model, operation, or expression of church, especially in Aliquippa. This conviction was echoed by Rev. Vera Shymoniak of Sound the Alarm Ministries, who observed in her interview, "We make room for different expressions and operations of the Spirit even while recognizing that we are all operating under one Spirit."[151]

Taken together, these theological and sociological perspectives suggest that sustainability in marginalized congregations is best understood as a dynamic, relational, and Spirit-dependent process rather than a static organizational achievement. Such

[151] Shymoniak interview.

congregations often persist not because they possess abundant resources, but because they cultivate networks of mutual care, practices of hospitality, and adaptive forms of ministry that enable them to remain embedded within their communities.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that dominant frameworks for assessing church vitality often reflect assumptions shaped by affluence, whiteness, institutional stability, and professionalized leadership rather than the fuller biblical and theological witness concerning the church's participation in the missio Dei. Through engagement with biblical texts, missional theology, feminist ecclesiology, postcolonial critique, Black church history, and sociological perspectives on community formation, the chapter has shown that marginalized Black congregations are not best understood through deficit narratives. Rather, they often embody alternative forms of ecclesial vitality rooted in Spirit-led discernment, relational interdependence, contextual leadership, hospitality, and faithful presence amid structural constraint.

The literature reviewed here provides the theological and conceptual framework for this study's central claim: when church vitality is measured primarily through dominant institutional metrics, marginalized Black church plants appear deficient; when vitality is measured through participation in God's redemptive mission among the poor and disenfranchised, these same congregations may instead appear paradigmatic. This reframing does not romanticize marginalization or deny the real pressures imposed by racialized economic exclusion. It does, however, challenge the theological adequacy of evaluative systems that confuse institutional privilege with ecclesial faithfulness.

Taken together, the biblical and theological sources engaged in this chapter establish the interpretive lens through which the empirical material of this study will be read. They clarify why the practices of discernment, place-rooted vocation, women's leadership, youth-centered ministry, dignity restoration, relational mutuality, and divine resourcing that emerge in marginalized congregations should not be treated as compensatory adaptations to deficiency, but as theologically meaningful expressions of congregational life and mission.

Transition to Chapter 3

Having established the theological and conceptual framework for rethinking ecclesial vitality in marginalized contexts, the study now turns to its research design and empirical analysis. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological framework, research procedures, and thematic analysis used to examine the congregational practices of Deliverance Temple and Sound the Alarm Ministries in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania. It then presents the major themes that emerged from the interview data, observational notes, and congregational materials, showing how these ministries narrate their origins, cultivate leadership, form membership, and sustain congregational life within contexts of economic and institutional constraint.

Chapter 3: Methodology & Research Design

Methodological Framework

This research employs a qualitative, practical-theological approach that integrates contextual analysis with theological reflection on congregational practices within marginalized communities. Consistent with practical theology, the study examines lived ministry practices in order to identify patterns of leadership formation, community engagement, and congregational sustainability within economically constrained contexts. Qualitative methods were selected because they allow close attention to the experiences, narratives, and practices of ministry leaders serving within Aliquippa's deindustrialized environment.

The study focuses particularly on leadership practices and congregational dynamics within communities that have experienced long-term economic marginalization. By attending to the lived experiences of pastors, ministry leaders, and congregational participants, the research seeks to identify recurring patterns that illuminate how congregations initiate ministries, cultivate leadership, form membership, and sustain ministry within economically marginalized communities. This methodological orientation reflects the commitments of practical theology to engage real ministry contexts while integrating theological interpretation with empirical observation.

Research Methods and Procedures

Population and participants: The primary participants in this study were ministry leaders from two congregations located in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania:

1. **Deliverance Temple, Church of God in Christ (COGIC)**. Deliverance Temple is a long-standing congregation whose ministry spans the period from the economic prosperity of the J&L Steel era through the city's subsequent industrial decline. The congregation has continued to serve Aliquippa's predominantly low-income population.
2. **Sound the Alarm Ministries.** Sound the Alarm Ministries is a nondenominational church plant rooted in Aliquippa that has developed extensive community-based initiatives, including daycare services, Christian schooling, workforce preparation programs, and other forms of social support for local families.

These congregations were selected because they represent ministries rooted in economically marginalized contexts that continue to sustain congregational life while serving local residents and families through educational, relational, and spiritual programs.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ministry leaders, supported by observational notes and review of congregational materials, including ministry descriptions, program documentation, and historical narratives of congregational development.

Data Analysis

The methodological approach described above provided the framework for analyzing participant narratives and contextual documentation. Six interviews were conducted and transcribed verbatim, producing approximately forty-seven pages of transcript data. The audio recordings were repeatedly reviewed in order to capture tone, emphasis, and non-verbal cues that might not appear fully in written transcripts. Transcripts were then examined through multiple readings, accompanied by analytic notes identifying recurring topics, metaphors, narrative patterns, and interpretive themes. Through iterative coding and inductive thematic analysis, several recurring patterns emerged that illuminate the theological and organizational practices sustaining the congregations studied. Initial codes were drawn both from the data (for example, “call to place,” “children as focus,” “daycare as ministry,” “no salary,” and “we just kept working”) and from conceptual frameworks identified in the literature (including themes of relational networks, practical-theological discernment, and sustainability strategies). These codes were then clustered into broader themes and subthemes that capture key dimensions of congregational life and ministry practice. The codes were then manually clustered into broader themes corresponding to major dimensions of congregational life identified in the study’s four research-question areas: origin and founding, leadership formation, membership development, and ministry sustainability.

To strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis, the interview data were triangulated with congregational documents and contextual observations. Member checking was also used with participants from Sound the Alarm Ministries and Deliverance Temple to confirm the broad accuracy of the thematic clustering and

interpretive direction of the findings. Themes that appeared in at least four of the six interviews were treated as especially robust, while less frequent but analytically significant patterns were retained as subthemes or negative cases where appropriate. Supporting materials are provided in the appendices as follows: the interview protocol appears in Appendix A, the full codebook in Appendix B, and the full transcript excerpts in Appendix C.

Several steps were taken to strengthen methodological rigor. First, each transcript was reviewed multiple times against the original audio recordings. Second, the thematic clustering was informally peer-checked through participant feedback during member checking. Third, the researcher's positionality as a person deeply immersed in the Aliquippa context was addressed through reflexive attention and interpretive caution, particularly by testing emerging themes against participant confirmation rather than relying solely on the researcher's prior familiarity with the setting.

Table 1 presents a concise data-to-theme overview, showing how the interview data clustered into core themes across the four research-question sections: origins and founding, leadership formation, membership and belonging, and sustainability. The "Number of Interviews" column indicates the breadth of thematic recurrence across the six interviews included in the study, while the representative evidence column provides brief illustrations of the kinds of transcript material that supported each theme.

The subsequent sections present these themes individually while offering interpretive analysis grounded in participant testimony and contextual evidence. Although each theme is presented separately for analytical clarity, they function

interdependently within a broader ecosystem of congregational practices that sustain ministry within contexts of economic and institutional constraint.

Table 1-Thematic Analysis Summary – Evidence from Six Interviews.

Data-to-Theme Overview

Theme Section	Core Theme	Number of Interviews	Representative Transcript Evidence	Research Question Link
Origins and Founding	Spirit-led Discernment	6/6	"We do nothing without prayer" / "Prayer first… exact amount needed" / "together, we make decisions for the church"	RQ1: Origins/call
	Call to community and place	6/6	"Why Aliquippa?" / "The Lord was sending us here to Aliquippa" / "my ministry is here"	RQ1: Sense of call and place
	Women as Infrastructure of Vision and Mission	5/6	"That very same building I had prayed for years earlier…" / "The LORD gave her a brilliant idea: she started this group called 'The Village Keepers'"	RQ1 / RQ2: Founding vision and leadership emergence
Leadership Formation	Leadership formation from within	6/6	"I probably have held every position possible in the local church,,,van driver… janitor… taught Sunday School…" / "we prayed for leaders and God would send them…" / "we began to impart some of the vision…"	RQ2: Leadership practices and development
Membership and Belonging	Children and youth as the core pathway for membership formation	6/6	"lowest cost daycare…" / "Can you keep my kids?" / "programs for the children in Linmar Terrace / "Y.E.S." / R.O.O.T.S	RQ3 / RQ4: Membership and belonging

	Holistic and Dignity Restoration	6/6	“we still value them” / “their lives were not over” / “...majority of our congregation has been from the poverty level for as long as I have been here…” /“restore the total person” / “teach literacy… budgeting…” / “allow them to see who they really are”	RQ3: Formation, care, restoration and missional identity
Sustainability	Resilience as institutional competency	6/6	“We just kept moving. We refused to stop.” / “An obstacle is just a temporary setback.” / “keep the doors open, keep the lights on”	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Adaptive ministries and leadership under constraint	6/6	“We had to repackage ministry” / “we had to become very, very creative” / “we understood the times we were in…” / “we transitioned… then became part of the re-entry program”	RQ4: Adaptive ministry practice
	Women as infrastructure of ministry sustainability	6/6	“I had prayer vigils there on the property” / “She started this group called ‘The Village Keepers’”	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Church-community mutuality as a model of congregational sustainability	6/6	“we networked with the businesses” / “extension of the Aliquippa School District”	RQ4: Community-embedded sustainability
	Institutional friction and financial gatekeeping	6/6	“Most of our pastors are not on salary” / “Salaries are a luxury in some of our churches”	RQ4: Sustainability and institutional evaluation

	Supernatural guidance and divine resourcing as operational theology	6/6	“exact amount of monies that we needed” / “God will always make a way”	RQ4: Theological narratives of sustainability

Note: The themes presented in Table 1 were derived through iterative coding of the verbatim interview transcripts. The frequencies reported in the “Number of Interviews” column indicate the breadth of recurrence of each theme across the six interviews, while the representative transcript evidence provides brief illustrations of the kinds of data that supported the thematic analysis. These themes were further interpreted in relation to the four research-question areas guiding this study.

Part I: Origin and Founding

The first subset of research questions explored how ministries in these congregations originated and how founding leaders discerned their initial direction within contexts of economic and institutional constraint. The following three themes describe the foundational dynamics through which ministries in these congregations emerged. Together they show how congregational origins were shaped through Spirit-led discernment, place-rooted vocation, and the relational leadership infrastructure sustained by women.

Theme 1: Spirit-led discernment as the foundational framework for ministry formation

Transcript analysis revealed Spirit-led discernment as the foundational framework, appearing in 28 instances in all six interviews (see Table 2; for full transcript evidence, see Appendix C-1). Leaders described prayer, prophecy, and communal clarity authorizing decisions without institutional metrics. Interpretation: Discernment integrates epistemology (knowing next step), governance (elders' prayer), and resilience (obedience despite no funds), challenging dominant strategic models (RQ1, RQ4).

Table 2 - Spirit-led Discernment - Representative Transcript Excerpts and Codes

	Excerpt	Prayer subtheme/code
1.	"We do what the Lord has called us to do." -*Deliverance Temple*	Foundational discernment
2.	"When He dealt with us starting the church, we started praying and asking God where?" -*Sound the Alarm*	Foundational discernment
3.	"Everything has to be endorsed by the Lord." -*Sound the Alarm*	Spiritual authorization
4.	"We would offer prayer in the community" -*Deliverance Temple*	Public/spatial discernment

Interview data revealed a consistent pattern in which **Spirit-led discernment functioned as the foundational framework guiding ministry formation and early leadership decisions** within the congregations studied. Participants described discernment not as supplemental spirituality but as the primary process through which leaders determined direction, authorized decisions, interpreted uncertainty, and persisted amid scarcity. Within these contexts, discernment operated as an integrated framework encompassing spiritual practice, communal governance, and leadership strategy.

Participants consistently described founding decisions and early ministry initiatives as emerging from sustained prayer, spiritual discipline, and collective reflection. Leaders recounted periods of prayer preceding program launches, property decisions, or organizational changes, often describing moments of clarity that were interpreted as divine guidance rather than tentative intuition. Decision-making frequently occurred within communal settings where pastors, elders, or ministry leaders prayed

together and discussed emerging directions. In these gatherings, prayer functioned not merely as spiritual preparation but as a central component of the decision-making process. Participants emphasized that ministry actions were authorized through shared discernment rather than individual preference, reinforcing a pattern in which spiritual practice and communal deliberation together shaped leadership decisions.

Analysis of participant narratives suggests that Spirit-led discernment operated through four interrelated functions within these congregations. First, discernment functioned as an **epistemological framework**, guiding how leaders interpreted divine direction and identified the next faithful step when institutional metrics or financial resources were limited. Second, discernment served as a **governance model**, in which communal prayer and discussion established legitimate authorization for ministry actions. Third, discernment functioned as a **risk framework**, enabling leaders to initiate ministries despite uncertainty by interpreting obedience to perceived divine direction as sufficient warrant to act. Finally, discernment operated as a **resilience engine**, sustaining leaders through extended periods of ambiguity by grounding their work in a sense of divine calling. Together these functions reveal that discernment was not simply a devotional practice but a structural leadership strategy that shaped how congregations navigated formation, opportunity, and adversity.

This pattern reflects broader theological traditions that emphasize the role of spiritual discernment within the life and mission of the church. Christian theology has long understood the guidance of the Spirit as central to communal decision-making and mission. Jürgen Moltmann, for example, emphasizes that the church's life unfolds through the active presence and guidance of the Spirit within the community of faith.

Similarly, missional theologians highlight the importance of discerning God's activity within particular contexts as a foundation for faithful ministry engagement. These perspectives illuminate the practices observed in this study, where discernment functions as an organizing framework shaping how congregations initiate ministry, interpret uncertainty, and remain rooted within their communities.

Theme 2: Call to community and place

Interview data revealed a consistent pattern in which ministry leadership was framed as a **calling to specific communities and geographic locations rather than as a transferable professional role**. Place-rooted vocation appeared at least 16 instances in all (see Table 3; for full transcript evidence, see Appendix C-2). Interpretation: Anchoring stabilizes plants via sustained presence (RQ1).

Table 3 - Call to People and Place Theme Transcript Excerpts and Codes

	Excerpt	**Geographic commitment subtheme/code**
1.	"We were also in 1989, sent by another ministry to establish a church in Zelienople but we really didn't feel the call for us was to Zelienople … but the Lord was sending us here to Aliquippa." -*Sound the Alarm interview*	Call to Aliquippa as place
2.	"One of our questions to the Lord was why would you send us here? Why Aliquippa?" -*Sound the Alarm interview*	Discerned call to place
3.	"We had opportunities, we did … However, I understood that my ministry was here." -*Deliverance Temple interview*	Staying despite alternative opportunities
4.	"Even now, I'm the bishop over 35 churches in Western Pennsylvania … but my ministry is in Aliquippa." -*Deliverance Temple interview*	Staying despite alternative opportunities

5.	"I've asked God that question before, 'LORD, why am I still here?' … but then you also look back and see what you accomplished right here." -*Deliverance Temple interview*	Commitment to marginalized place

Participants described their ministries as vocationally anchored within particular neighborhoods and relational networks, often shaped by personal ties to Aliquippa and a sustained commitment to communities experiencing economic decline and structural marginalization. Within the congregations studied, this place-rooted calling functioned as a defining framework guiding where leaders served, how long they remained, and how they interpreted their ministry responsibilities.

Interview data revealed a consistent pattern in which ministry leaders described their work as a call to specific communities and places rather than as transferable professional assignments. Several leaders described returning to Aliquippa or choosing to remain in the city despite opportunities to pursue ministry in contexts with greater financial stability. One participant described Pastor Rick Shymoniak as a 'son of Aliquippa,' sent back to a community experiencing economic hardship and diminished hope. Similarly, Bishop Moreland explained his decision to remain in Aliquippa as obedience to a divine assignment to that specific city.

Participants also described sustaining long-term pastoral presence despite economic precarity and institutional strain. Leaders framed their continued presence within these communities as faithfulness to the people they served rather than as a lack of opportunity elsewhere. Over time, this sustained relational presence cultivated trust networks that strengthened ministry initiatives and supported congregational stability.

Analysis of participant narratives suggests that this place-rooted calling operates through three interconnected dimensions: **geographic commitment**, **relational commitment**, and **historical consciousness**. Geographic commitment reflects leaders' decisions to remain in communities experiencing economic decline or structural marginalization rather than seeking ministry mobility. Relational commitment describes the sustained pastoral presence that develops through long-term engagement with particular congregations and neighborhoods. Historical consciousness refers to leaders' awareness that their ministries exist within broader histories of racialized economic disinvestment and community resilience. Together these dimensions form what may be described as **vocational anchoring**, a leadership orientation in which ministry identity is inseparable from the specific communities and histories in which leaders serve. This vocational rootedness stabilizes congregational life and enables ministries to adapt over time without severing ties to local relationships or community memory.

This pattern resonates with theological reflections emphasizing the importance of place and belonging within Christian community formation. Willie James Jennings argues that Christian discipleship involves learning to inhabit particular places in ways that cultivate belonging and resist patterns of social displacement. Similarly, scholarship on the Black church has long emphasized the role of congregations as place-rooted institutions sustaining communities amid social and economic marginalization. These insights illuminate the patterns observed in this study, where ministry identity is shaped not by institutional mobility but by sustained presence within specific communities and histories.

Theme 3: Women as infrastructure of ministry vision and foundation

Interview data revealed that women functioned as critical infrastructure in the **formation and early development of ministry vision** within the congregations studied. Participants consistently described women's spiritual discernment, relational leadership, and organizational labor as shaping the environments in which ministries were imagined, discerned, and launched. Rather than operating as supplemental participants, women's contributions formed a structural foundation supporting congregational origins and early program development (see Table 4; for full transcript evidence, see Appendix C-3).

Table 4 - Women as Infrastructure of Vision and Mission Theme Transcript Excerpts and Codes

Excerpt	Women Vision/Mission theme/code
"I noticed that the one, the older woman, was the same woman that I had been interceding for. I opened the service back up … recognizing that this was a divine connection that God was making." -*Sound the Alarm interviews*	Women as infrastructure of vision
"That particular night, the entire family received the Lord Jesus Christ and became a part of our ministry… We began to pray, we began to train them in soul-winning. We began to impart some of the vision to that family. That family is still a part of our ministry today." -*Sound the Alarm interviews*	Women initiating and shaping programmatic ministry
"Our oldest daughter had worked with Easter Seal Society … she came with a vision of well — 'Mom, Dad, how can I help start this daycare?' So she helped with that." -*Sound the Alarm interviews*	Women initiating and shaping programmatic ministry
"She had a background in criminal justice and she was a probation officer for the community, and they allowed her to start a pilot program." -*Deliverance Temple interviews*	Women as infrastructure of vision and programming

"Being that she was sitting with them, the LORD gave her a brilliant idea: she started this group called 'The Village Keepers.'" -*Deliverance Temple interviews*	Women as infrastructure of vision and programming

Participants frequently described women sustaining the spiritual practices that surrounded founding decisions and early ministry development. Women organized prayer gatherings, led fasting practices, and provided spiritual counsel that helped frame communal discernment. These practices created the spiritual atmosphere within which leaders interpreted emerging ministry directions and evaluated opportunities for action. Participants also noted that women often identified emerging community needs and encouraged congregational responses to those needs. In several instances, women helped initiate early ministry activities or organized volunteers who supported foundational programs serving children, families, and neighborhood residents. In addition to spiritual practices, women carried substantial relational and administrative labor during the formative stages of ministry. They coordinated volunteers, organized events, and maintained communication networks that connected congregational members to the broader community. Through these activities, women often functioned as the relational bridge between the church and the neighborhood it served.

Analysis of these narratives suggests that women's leadership operated through three interconnected forms of infrastructure during the founding stages of ministry: spiritual infrastructure, relational infrastructure, and programmatic infrastructure. Spiritual infrastructure refers to the prayer practices and discernment cultures sustained by women that shaped how congregations interpreted divine guidance. Relational infrastructure describes the networks of care, communication, and trust that women cultivated within both congregational and community settings. Programmatic

infrastructure reflects women's role in organizing volunteers and initiating early ministry activities. Together these forms of leadership created the conditions necessary for congregational vision to emerge and for ministries to move from discernment to implementation. These findings indicate that women's leadership during founding stages often operated through distributed and relational forms of influence rather than through formal institutional authority.

This pattern resonates with theological reflections emphasizing the collaborative and relational nature of leadership within Christian communities. Feminist ecclesiology has long argued that the life of the church frequently depends upon forms of leadership that operate beyond formal clerical roles. Letty M. Russell describes the church as a community in which leadership is shared through networks of participation rather than restricted to hierarchical office. Similarly, Kwok Pui-lan highlights how women's leadership often emerges through attentive engagement with the social and spiritual realities surrounding faith communities. These insights illuminate the patterns observed in this study, where women's discernment and labor function as foundational structures supporting congregational vision and early ministry formation.

Part II: Leadership

The next set of themes emerged from the second subset of research questions, which examined how leadership capacity develops within congregations operating with limited institutional resources. The findings address the study's leadership-focused research question by examining how leadership is recognized, cultivated, and sustained within congregations operating under conditions of limited institutional support and economic constraint. Across the interviews, leadership did not appear primarily as a

function of formal credentialing, external recruitment, or denominational appointment. Rather, it emerged through congregational participation, demonstrated faithfulness, spiritual discernment, and relational trust within the life of the community. The themes summarized in Table 5 (see Table 6 for transcript excerpts; for full transcript evidence, see Appendix C-4) therefore highlight leadership formation as an internally generated and contextually rooted process, one shaped by service, practice, prayer, and communal recognition rather than by bureaucratic or heavily resourced institutional pathways. Together, these leadership themes illuminate how the congregations studied develop ministry capacity from within and sustain their participation in God's mission through distributed, adaptive, and relational forms of leadership.

Table 5 - Leadership Formation Theme Overview

Theme Section	Core Theme	Number of Interviews	Representative Transcript Evidence	RQ Link
Leadership Formation	Emergent from within	6/6	"God would just begin to add, and let me add there too, that even when we got in the building, we were praying for leadership, for people to become parts of the leadership and God would send them." (Vera Shymoniak)	RQ2: Leadership practices
	Internally cultivated roles	6/6	Participants described leadership capacity developing organically from within the congregation rather than through external recruitment or institutional appointment.	RQ2: Leadership practices

	Relational trust and gifting	6/6	Members stepped into ministry and organizational roles through demonstrated commitment, spiritual gifting, and relational trust.	RQ2: Leadership practices
	Distributed leadership formation	6/6	Leadership roles emerged through participation and relational trust rather than through formal hiring processes.	RQ2: Leadership practices
	Contextually rooted leaders	6/6	Congregations relied on members who were already active within the community and familiar with its social realities.	RQ2: Leadership practices
	Capacity without added burden	6/6	This internally cultivated leadership model expanded ministry capacity while remaining responsive to economic constraints and community realities.	RQ2: Leadership practices

Theme 4: Leadership formation from within

Interview data revealed a consistent pattern in which leadership capacity developed **organically from within the congregation rather than through external recruitment or institutional appointment**. Participants described members stepping into ministry and organizational roles through demonstrated commitment, spiritual gifting, and relational trust. Within the congregations studied, this internally cultivated

leadership model expanded ministry capacity while remaining responsive to economic constraints and community realities.

Table 6 - Leadership formation from within theme supporting transcript excerpts

	Excerpt	Informal/hidden leadership subtheme/code
1.	"I probably have held every position possible in the local church." -*Deliverance Temple Interviews*	Leadership through service and practical labor
2.	"I was the van driver; I was the janitor; I taught Sunday School; I was one of the Associate Minister Elders." -*Deliverance Temple Interviews*	Leadership through service and practical labor
3.	"Whatever your hands can do, you do it. Nothing is above you, nothing is beneath you. You see the need and you begin to minister to the need." -*Deliverance Temple Interviews*	Leadership through service and practical labor
4.	"We began to train them in soul-winning. We began to impart some of the vision to that family. That family is still a part of our ministry today." -*Sound the Alarm Interviews*	Vision transmission and lay formation
5.	"God began to deposit in their hearts, vision for the community as well. They were following the vision that we had begun to impart to them and their hearts connecting to it. Few but united. Few people, but very united in purpose." -*Sound the Alarm Interviews*	Vision transmission and lay formation

Participants described numerous examples of congregational members assuming leadership responsibilities after demonstrating sustained involvement in ministry activities. At Deliverance Temple, members such as Selena Moreland developed community initiatives after contributing to existing programs and demonstrating familiarity with neighborhood needs. Similarly, leaders at Sound the Alarm described

individuals like Ms. Shymoniak and Ms. Tamu Gilbert assuming responsibility for educational programming and administrative coordination as ministries expanded.

Participants emphasized that these leadership roles emerged through participation and relational trust rather than through formal hiring processes (for full transcript evidence, see Appendix C-4). In contexts where limited financial resources made additional staff positions unfeasible, congregations relied on members who were already active within the community and familiar with its social realities. This approach enabled ministries to sustain educational programs, youth initiatives, and community outreach efforts despite limited financial infrastructure.

Analysis of participant narratives suggests that internal leadership formation served four interconnected functions within these congregations. First, **sustainability** was achieved by expanding leadership capacity without increasing financial burden, allowing ministries to continue operating within resource-constrained environments. Second, **contextual competence** emerged as leaders were drawn from individuals already embedded within the community and therefore familiar with its social dynamics and needs. Third, **relational trust** developed through shared responsibility, as leadership roles were often entrusted to members whose spiritual maturity and commitment had been observed within the congregation. Finally, **adaptive flexibility** allowed ministries to respond quickly to emerging needs because internal leaders were already relationally invested in the community and able to mobilize programs without extensive institutional processes. Together these dynamics reveal a leadership model in which authority is distributed across the congregation rather than concentrated exclusively within formal clerical roles.

This pattern resonates with theological reflections emphasizing shared leadership within Christian communities. Ecclesiological scholarships frequently describe the church as a body in which diverse members contribute distinct gifts for the common mission of the community. Feminist ecclesiology likewise highlights how leadership within congregations often emerges through relational and collaborative practices rather than hierarchical structures alone. These perspectives illuminate the distributed leadership patterns observed in this study, where ministry capacity expands through the participation and development of congregational members.

Part III: Membership Formation

The third subset of research questions explored how individuals and families become connected to congregational life within economically marginalized communities. Interview data revealed that membership formation in the congregations studied did not occur primarily through traditional evangelistic recruitment or denominational transfer. Instead, individuals and families became connected to congregational life through sustained engagement in ministries addressing youth development, family stability, and community restoration (see Table 7).

Table 7 -Core pathways for membership formation overview

Theme Section	Core Theme	Number of Interviews	Representative Transcript Evidence	RQ Link
Membership Formation	Children and youth as the core pathway for membership formation	6/6	Participants described children and youth ministries as the primary entry point into congregational life for many families.	RQ3: Membership and belonging
	Family connection through youth programs	6/6	“Parents initially engaged these programs in search of safe environments, educational opportunities, or supportive mentoring relationships for their children.” -Sound the Alarm	RQ3: Membership and belonging
	Relational bridge into membership	6/6	Continued participation in youth programs fostered deeper relational ties between families and the congregations hosting these initiatives.	RQ3: Membership and belonging
	Youth ministries as entry points	6/6	“Programs included summer camps, daycare services, Christian schooling initiatives such as Y.E.S., mentorship opportunities, and employment preparation programs.” -Sound the Alarm	RQ3: Membership and belonging
	Children and youth as central organizing structures	6/6	Youth-centered initiatives connected families to congregational life and cultivated long-term relationships with families.”	RQ3: Membership and belonging

	Membership through restoration and participation	6/6	Membership formation therefore emerged through lived experiences of restoration and community participation rather than through formal institutional recruitment alone.”	RQ3: Membership and belonging

The following themes describe how these ministries function as pathways into congregational belonging: the central role of children and youth initiatives and the broader framework of holistic restoration through which individuals and families experience dignity, opportunity, and communal participation.

Theme 5: Children and youth as the core pathway for membership formation

Interview data revealed a consistent pattern in which **children and youth ministries functioned as the primary entry point into congregational life** for many families (see Table 8; for full transcript evidence, see Appendix C-5)). Participants described programs serving children and adolescents as central organizing structures through which congregations engaged surrounding communities and cultivated long-term relationships with families.

Participants described a range of youth-centered initiatives that connected families to congregational life. Programs included summer camps, daycare services, Christian schooling initiatives such as Y.E.S., mentorship opportunities, and employment preparation programs at Sound the Alarm. Similarly, ministries at Deliverance Temple included programs such as R.O.O.T.S. and Village Keepers that focused on youth mentorship, educational support, and family engagement. These initiatives frequently drew children and adolescents from economically marginalized neighborhoods and

public housing communities. Parents initially engaged these programs in search of safe environments, educational opportunities, or supportive mentoring relationships for their children. Over time, continued participation in youth programs fostered deeper relational ties between families and the congregations hosting these initiatives. Participants emphasized that youth programming often created the first sustained point of contact between congregations and community families. As children developed relationships with mentors and program leaders, parents became more involved in congregational activities and community events.

Analysis of participant narratives suggests that youth-centered ministries operate as generational stabilization structures within these congregations. By providing safe environments, educational support, mentorship, and relational care, these initiatives address vulnerabilities faced by youth in economically constrained environments while simultaneously strengthening connections between families and congregational life. This pattern reflects a leadership orientation that treats investment in the next generation as a foundational strategy for community restoration. Rather than functioning as supplemental programming, youth ministries operate as central organizational hubs through which congregations build trust, strengthen families, and cultivate long-term community relationships. Through these sustained engagements, families often transition from program participants to active members within the congregation.

These findings resonate with scholarship emphasizing the social and educational roles historically played by Black churches within marginalized communities. Sociological studies have long documented how Black congregations frequently develop programs addressing educational opportunity, youth mentorship, and family stability.

Such initiatives reflect the church's role as a community institution supporting generational resilience amid broader structural inequities.

Table 8 - Children and youth core membership formation pathway supporting transcript excerpts

	Excerpt	Needs-based program initiation subtheme/code
1.	"We set up programs for the children in Linmar Terrace — camps exposing them to travel and exposing them to just campgrounds. Taking them out of the community, and efforts just to broaden their horizons." -*Sound the Alarm interviews*	Children's and youth exposure programs
2.	"So we began to take in children from the community." -*Sound the Alarm interviews*	Children's and youth exposure programs
3.	"We saw that need in that generation, that was going that road. We had one sister here, Selena. She had a background in criminal justice and she was a probation officer for the community, and they allowed her to start a pilot program." -*Deliverance Temple interviews*	Justice-involved youth intervention
4.	"She started this group called 'The Village Keepers.' … It was like an in-school, after-school program for those that were on probation." -*Deliverance Temple interviews*	Justice-involved youth intervention
5.	"Out of that program, The Village Keepers' program, that's where the R.O.O.T.S came into existence… A couple of nights a week, we would be down here… we would assist those young men with the afterschool activities, the work… Then of course, life skills." -*Deliverance Temple interviews*	Youth programs as ministry pathways

Theme 6: Holistic restoration and dignity formation as pathways to membership

Interview data revealed that membership formation within the congregations studied frequently occurred through participation in ministries designed to restore dignity

and expand opportunity within economically marginalized communities (see Table 9; for full transcript evidence, see Appendix C-6).

Table 9 - Holistic and Dignity Restoration Theme Supporting Transcript Excerpts

	Excerpt	**Holistic and dignity restoration subtheme/code**
1.	"Our goal and mission was to restore the total person. Christ at the center, addressing spirit, soul, body, and social condition." -*Sound the Alarm Interviews*	Whole-person, Christ-centered restoration
2.	"We also started what we call the Hope Christian Center in that building, which was a social service program, Christ-centered with Christ at the center." -*Sound the Alarm Interviews*	Whole-person, Christ-centered restoration
3.	"We knew young moms who were mostly single mothers that needed to be taught in nurturing. So our programs began to expand. So we developed a program for nurturing young moms and young fathers in taking care of their kids." -*Sound the Alarm Interviews*	Educational, parental, and economic empowerment
4.	"Allow them to see who they really are. Allow them to know that I am not what I am because of my current situation. There's more to me than just not having a job right now… -*Deliverance Temple interviews*"	Restoration of dignity and self-worth
5.	"We always wanted those individuals to know in spite of the mistakes that they made, we still value them." -*Deliverance Temple interviews*	Restoration of dignity and self-worth
6.	"We would assist individuals coming out of incarceration to kind of reduce recidivism… to see what the needs are to be reintegrated into the communities and to be connected with the families." -*Deliverance Temple interviews*	Restorative intervention for vulnerable persons

Across the cases, membership formation was closely connected to practices that restored dignity, affirmed human worth, and addressed the lived effects of economic marginalization, stigma, and personal hardship. Participants described congregational ministries as spaces where individuals were not merely assisted but received as persons

with agency, gifts, and spiritual significance. This was especially evident in the way both ministries welcomed and restoratively supported persons whose past decisions, present struggles, or difficult circumstances might have made them unwelcome in more conventional social or ecclesial settings. Rather than defining people by failure, crisis, poverty, addiction, family instability, incarceration history, or other stigmatized experiences, these ministries created spaces where persons could be seen, accompanied, prayed with, encouraged, and gradually restored to relational belonging. Rather than treating people as problems to be managed or recipients of charity, these ministries cultivated forms of participation that communicated worth, responsibility, forgiveness, and possibility. Rather than treating poverty or social vulnerability as individual failure, these congregational initiatives addressed broader structural conditions affecting marginalized communities while creating environments of practical assistance and relational affirmation. Individuals became connected to the life of the church as they experienced the congregation as a place where their struggles were taken seriously without being reduced to those struggles. Belonging developed through repeated encounters in which persons were welcomed beyond shame, supported through difficulty, and invited into relationships marked by trust, accountability, and mutual care. Within contexts marked by economic decline, structural marginalization, and social stigma, congregational membership was formed as people encountered ministries that affirmed their humanity, made room for restoration, and opened pathways into shared life with the congregation. Membership formation therefore emerged through lived experiences of restoration, participation, and community connection rather than through formal institutional recruitment alone.

Theme 6 therefore shows that membership formation in these congregations was not limited to formal affiliation or attendance patterns. Analysis of participant narratives suggests that these ministries functioned as restorative participation pathways through which individuals and families experienced dignity, relational belonging, and expanded opportunity. These findings align with theological perspectives emphasizing the church's role in fostering holistic human flourishing within marginalized communities. Samuel Wells's account of "being with" is especially relevant here, because it frames faithful Christian presence not as doing ministry for people from a position of control, but as abiding with others in ways that honor their full humanity. Amos Yong's theology of hospitality also supports this pattern by emphasizing the reception of the other as a site of ecclesial and pneumatological encounter. Likewise, Letty Russell's vision of the church "in the round" helps interpret these ministries as spaces where persons ordinarily marginalized by social, economic, or ecclesial systems are welcomed into shared participation rather than passive dependency. These perspectives illuminate the patterns observed in this study, where congregations cultivated membership through practices that restored dignity, received stigmatized persons into relational belonging, and expanded opportunity within communities shaped by economic and social inequities.

Part IV: Sustainability

The fourth subset of research questions explored how congregations sustain ministry within contexts of limited institutional support and structural constraint. Analysis of interview data revealed several institutional capacities that enable ministries to sustain congregational life and ministry presence despite financial strain and uneven

institutional support. The themes summarized in Table 10 describe these patterns of sustainability: resilience as institutional competency, adaptive ministries and leadership under constraint, women as infrastructure of ministry sustainability, church-community mutuality as a model of congregational sustainability, institutional friction and financial gatekeeping, and supernatural guidance and divine resourcing as operational theology. Together, these themes illustrate how congregations maintain ministry continuity within Aliquippa's deindustrialized context despite limited denominational support.

Table 10 - Overview of Sustainability Themes Table

Theme Section	Core Theme	Number of Interviews	Representative Transcript Evidence	RQ Link
Sustainability	Resilience as institutional competency	6/6	Participants described economic limitation, volunteer fatigue, and institutional marginalization as routine features of ministry rather than exceptional disruptions.	RQ4: Reframing paradigms
Sustainability	Adaptive ministry	6/6	"So we kind of had to repackage ministry so to speak. We had to realize the needs that were before us because even though a lot of our parishioners were no longer there, we still had ministry to do. Ministry is still a part of who we are, whether we have or don't have." (Moreland)	RQ4: Sustainability narratives

Sustainability	Women as infrastructure of ministry sustainability	6/6	Interview data revealed that women functioned as critical infrastructure for ministry sustainability within the congregations studied.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
Sustainability	Church-community mutuality as a model of congregational sustainability	6/6	Interview data revealed a consistent pattern of church-community mutuality, in which congregations functioned as embedded hubs within the social and relational life of their neighborhoods.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
Sustainability	Navigated institutional friction	6/6	Leaders frequently described the church as a safe space or neighborhood anchor, emphasizing its role in strengthening families, supporting youth, and expanding access to resources.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
Sustainability	Supernatural guidance and divine resourcing	6/6	“So some years later — at this point they still didn’t know — they were in prayer and the Lord spoke to them and said ‘Release this property into the hands of Sound the Alarm Ministries,’ and we acquired this property much later.” -Sound the Alarm	RQ4: Sustainability narratives

Theme 7: Resilience as institutional competency

Across interviews and analytic coding, resilience emerged as an institutional competency expressed through reinterpretive capacity, emotional durability, programmatic persistence, and vocational anchoring (see Table 11 and Table 12; for full transcript evidence, see Appendix C-7). Leaders consistently reframed structural barriers as opportunities for ministry, sustained emotional durability amid institutional discouragement, maintained programmatic persistence in community initiatives despite strain, and remained vocationally anchored to the people and places they served.

Table 11 - Resilience as institutional competency overview

Theme Section	Core Theme	Number of Interviews	Representative Transcript Evidence	RQ Link
Sustainability	Resilience as institutional competency	6/6	Participants described economic limitation, volunteer fatigue, and institutional marginalization as routine features of ministry rather than exceptional disruptions.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Barriers reframed as discernment	6/6	Leaders repeatedly reframed them as invitations to discernment and adaptive action.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Reinterpretive capacity	6/6	One participant described ministry obstacles as moments when leaders must listen more carefully for what God might be doing next.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Emotional durability practices	6/6	Communal prayer, shared leadership responsibilities, and mutual encouragement among volunteers.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives

	Programmatic persistence	6/6	Evidence of programmatic persistence was visible in the continuation of youth programs, neighborhood initiatives, and educational outreach even during periods of financial strain."	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Vocational anchoring	6/6	Leaders articulated strong commitments to their neighborhoods, expressing reluctance to abandon communities experiencing economic hardship.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives

Participants described economic limitation, volunteer fatigue, and institutional marginalization as routine features of ministry rather than exceptional disruptions. Financial constraints, inconsistent denominational support, and the emotional weight of sustaining community programs with minimal resources appeared frequently across interviews (see Table 12). Rather than interpreting these constraints as indicators of institutional failure, leaders repeatedly reframed them as invitations to discernment and adaptive action. One participant described ministry obstacles as moments when leaders must “listen more carefully for what God might be doing next.” This interpretive pattern reflects reinterpretive capacity, as barriers were consistently narrated as opportunities for faithful response rather than reasons to suspend ministry initiatives. Participants also described practices that strengthened emotional durability, including communal prayer, shared leadership responsibilities, and mutual encouragement among volunteers. These practices enabled leaders to remain engaged despite discouragement from limited institutional recognition or financial gatekeeping. Evidence of programmatic persistence was visible in the continuation of youth programs, neighborhood initiatives, and educational outreach even during periods of financial strain. Participants emphasized that

ministry presence within the community could not be suspended simply because institutional resources were scarce. Finally, leaders articulated strong commitments to their neighborhoods, expressing reluctance to abandon communities experiencing economic hardship. This commitment reflects vocational anchoring, as ministry calling was described as inseparable from the specific people and places served.

Together, these four competencies—reinterpretive capacity, emotional durability, programmatic persistence, and vocational anchoring—constitute a patterned form of resilience embedded within the congregational cultures studied. Rather than representing episodic responses to crisis, these capacities function as ongoing interpretive frameworks through which leaders understand ministry within contexts of structural constraint. Reinterpretive capacity allows congregations to resist narratives of institutional failure by reframing scarcity as a context for creative ministry engagement. Emotional durability sustains leaders through the discouragement that often accompanies ministry within marginalized communities. Programmatic persistence ensures that community-centered initiatives continue even when institutional support is inconsistent. Vocational anchoring grounds these efforts within a theological commitment to remain present among specific communities. The contrast between external institutional assessments and internal congregational interpretations further highlights the role of these competencies. This divergence illustrates how resilience operates as an interpretive framework through which congregational health is measured primarily by fidelity to calling rather than institutional validation. Importantly, resilience in these congregations is not sustained by individual leaders alone but by collective practices of support, prayer, and collaborative labor. These communal practices distribute the emotional and organizational demands of ministry

across the congregation, reinforcing the durability necessary for long-term ministry engagement.

This pattern of resilience aligns with longstanding observations within Black church scholarship regarding the adaptive capacities of congregations operating under conditions of social and economic marginalization. Early sociological studies of the Black church documented how congregations historically functioned as stabilizing institutions within communities facing structural inequality. Similarly, theological scholarship has emphasized the centrality of communal belonging and place-based identity within Black ecclesial life. Willie James Jennings argues that Christian communities are formed through practices of belonging that resist social fragmentation and cultivate relational rootedness within particular communities. This emphasis on belonging resonates with the vocational anchoring observed in this study, where leaders consistently articulated their calling as inseparable from the communities they serve. Jennings further critiques theological traditions that detach Christian formation from embodied community life, emphasizing instead the importance of remaining embedded within concrete social relationships. Such insights illuminate the persistence of community-rooted ministry among participants in this study, whose programmatic persistence and vocational anchoring reflect commitments to sustained presence rather than institutional mobility. Taken together, these findings suggest that resilience within these congregations is not accidental survival but a cultivated institutional capacity shaped by historical patterns of Black ecclesial endurance and theological commitments to communal belonging.

Table 12 - Resilience as sustainability narrative supporting transcript excerpts

	Excerpt	Resilience and adaptability subtheme/code
1.	"So, that kind of caused a skeleton crew to remain and it had a great impact on the local churches not just only here but also all the local churches in town." -*Deliverance Temple interviews*	Resilience under economic and institutional disruption
2.	"We had prayer services in the sanctuary before it was concrete… We just kept moving. We refused to stop." -*Sound the Alarm interviews*	Resilience under material and institutional constraint
3.	"We held our 6th and 7th graders right in this room. And it wasn't even finished… trusting God…" -*Sound the Alarm interviews*	Theological and practical endurance through obstacles
4.	"An obstacle is just a temporary setback. An obstacle don't mean stop." -*Deliverance Temple interviews*	Theological and practical endurance through obstacles
5.	"You may not be able to move the mountain but I can climb it or I can go around it." -*Deliverance Temple interviews*	Theological and practical endurance through obstacles
6.	"God allowed us to go through those challenges so that we can realize that if we put things in His hands… He opened doors where there were no doors." -*Sound the Alarm interviews*	Theological and practical endurance through obstacles

Theme 8: Adaptive ministries and leadership under constraint

Interview data revealed a consistent pattern of context-responsive ministry innovation, in which leaders adjusted programs, partnerships, and resource strategies in response to community needs and internal constraints (see Table 13). Rather than relying

on denominational templates or institutional funding streams, congregations demonstrated the capacity to pivot ministries, cultivate partnerships, and creatively mobilize existing assets in order to sustain community engagement. Within these congregations, innovation did not emerge from surplus capacity but from attentive responses to local conditions and community needs.

Table 13 - Ministry and leadership adaptiveness

Theme Section	Core Theme	Number of Interviews	Representative Transcript Evidence	RQ Link
Sustainability	Adaptive innovation	6/6	Participants described practices that strengthened emotional durability, including communal prayer, shared leadership responsibilities, and mutual encouragement among volunteers.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Quick response to emerging needs	6/6	Adaptive flexibility allowed ministries to respond quickly to emerging needs because internal leaders were already relationally invested in the community.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Innovation without institutional processes	6/6	Ministries sustained educational programs, youth initiatives, and community outreach efforts despite limited financial infrastructure.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Relational rather than bureaucratic	6/6	Internal leaders were already relationally invested in the community and able to mobilize programs without extensive institutional processes.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Expansion through constraint	6/6	Financial constraints, inconsistent denominational support, and the emotional weight of sustaining community programs with minimal resources appeared frequently across interviews.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives

	Innovation as sustainability	6/6	Sustainability was achieved by expanding leadership capacity without increasing financial burden, allowing ministries to continue operating within resource-constrained environments.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives

Participants frequently described ministries emerging from observed gaps within the surrounding community. Educational programs, childcare initiatives, youth mentorship efforts, and financial empowerment activities developed through this process of responding directly to community conditions (see Table 14; for full transcript evidence, see Appendix C-8). Leaders also described repurposing congregational space, mobilizing volunteer expertise, and forming partnerships with local organizations to support ministry initiatives despite limited financial resources. When traditional funding avenues were unavailable, congregations relied on relational networks and underutilized congregational assets to sustain programs. These examples illustrate a recurring pattern in which ministry initiatives were not predetermined institutional strategies but responsive adjustments shaped by local realities (for example, Sound the Alarm Ministries' College/Science Center initiatives, community daycare and youth programming narratives).

Together these practices demonstrate a leadership posture characterized by contextual attentiveness, structural flexibility, and resource creativity. Leaders interpreted environmental signals—community needs, available skills within the congregation, and potential partnerships—and restructured ministry practices accordingly. Innovation therefore functioned less as entrepreneurial expansion and more as faithful responsiveness to contextual realities. The data further indicate that this capacity was

distributed across the congregation rather than concentrated solely in pastoral leadership. Women's leadership, volunteer labor, and collaborative ministry practices significantly expanded congregational ability to pivot programs and mobilize new initiatives. Within these ministries, innovation emerged precisely because leaders operated within constrained environments that required creative reconfiguration of available resources.

These findings align with theological perspectives that emphasize the church's role in fostering holistic human flourishing within marginalized communities. Missional and practical-theological scholarship emphasizes ministry as a form of contextual discernment, faithful presence, and participation in God's work within particular places. Willie James Jennings's work on Christian belonging and formation helps interpret these practices as ecclesial responses embedded within particular social realities rather than detached from them. Read alongside Samuel Wells's account of faithful Christian presence as "being with," the context-responsive ministry practices observed in this study demonstrate how congregations sustain ministry presence through innovation shaped by community conditions rather than institutional resources.

Table 14 - Adaptive Ministries and Leadership under Constraint Theme-Sustainability Transcript Excerpts

Excerpt	Adaptive ministries and leadership under constraint subtheme/code
"We knew young moms who were mostly single mothers that needed to be taught in nurturing. So our programs began to expand." -*Sound the Alarm Interviews*	Adaptive family and social-service programming
"At that location, a Christian school in the area was closing… the school called us and asked… 'we heard that you have a vision for a Christian School; how can we help?'" -*Sound the Alarm Interviews*	Adaptive educational and youth opportunity responses

"But whenever the steel mill shut down… we kind of had to repackage ministry so to speak." -*Deliverance Temple Interviews*	Adaptive outreach restructuring after economic decline
"We had to become very, very creative. We had to be strong in outreach, outreach ministries… we had to be very, very intentional in ministry outside the four walls." -*Deliverance Temple Interviews*	Adaptive outreach restructuring after economic decline
"What we did was, we kind of went around the city of Aliquippa in the different neighborhoods… 'Street Meetings' where we just take church out of the building and we would set up in different areas in the communities." -*Deliverance Temple Interviews*	Adaptive outreach restructuring after economic decline
"We were in the community, we understood the times we were living in and we knew what to do." -*Deliverance Temple Interviews*	Context-reading as adaptive leadership logic

Theme 9: Women as infrastructure of ministry sustainability

Interview data revealed a consistent pattern in which women functioned as critical infrastructure for ministry sustainability within the congregations studied (see Table 15). Participants repeatedly described women's spiritual discernment, relational leadership, and organizational labor as stabilizing forces within congregational life. Within these ministries, women's leadership operated not merely as participation but as a structural mechanism through which congregations sustained programs, strengthened community relationships, and maintained continuity amid financial and institutional constraints.

Table 15 - Women emerging as infrastructure of sustainability framework

Theme Section	Core Theme	Number of Interviews	Representative Transcript Evidence	RQ Link
Sustainability	Women as infrastructure of ministry sustainability	6/6	Interview data revealed that women functioned as critical infrastructure for ministry sustainability within the congregations studied.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Spiritual discernment and relational leadership	6/6	Participants repeatedly described women's spiritual discernment, relational leadership, and organizational labor as stabilizing forces within congregational life.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Addressing community gaps	6/6	Women initiating and sustaining ministries that addressed gaps in community support systems, particularly in programs serving children, youth, and families.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Emotional and organizational labor	6/6	"Women carried significant emotional and organizational labor within the congregations, coordinating volunteers, mentoring youth, and maintaining relational networks."	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Structural backbone	6/6	"Women's leadership constituted a structural backbone through which congregational life was organized and sustained."	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Distributed relational influence	6/6	"Women's leadership during founding stages often operated through distributed and relational forms of influence rather than through formal institutional authority."	RQ4: Sustainability narratives

Both Sound the Alarm Ministries and Deliverance Temple participants described women initiating and sustaining ministries that addressed gaps in community support systems, particularly in programs serving children, youth, and families. Several ministry expansions originated through women's attentiveness to emerging needs within the surrounding community, including educational initiatives, youth mentorship programs, and family support structures. Women also carried significant emotional and organizational labor within the congregations, coordinating volunteers, mentoring youth, and maintaining relational networks that connected church members with the broader community. Through these activities, women frequently functioned as both spiritual discerners and programmatic organizers, enabling ministries to respond quickly to evolving community conditions.

Together these practices reveal that women function as theological and operational anchors within congregations operating under economic constraint (see Table 16; for full transcript evidence, see Appendix C-9). Their relational attentiveness, sustained labor, and spiritual sensitivity expanded the congregations' capacity to initiate programs, maintain community partnerships, and respond adaptively to local needs. This pattern also highlights a tension between congregational reality and institutional measurement. Because denominational frameworks often prioritize formal leadership roles or compensation structures, the distributed and relational nature of women's leadership may remain under-recognized within institutional evaluation systems. Nevertheless, the data demonstrates that women's leadership constitutes a foundational infrastructure through which ministries sustain community engagement and internal resilience. Without this spiritual, relational, and programmatic leadership, the

congregations examined in this study would likely struggle to maintain their current levels of ministry activity.

Table 16 - Women as Infrastructure of Ministry Sustainability Theme Supporting Transcript Excerpts

	Excerpt	**Women as infrastructure of ministry sustainability subtheme/code**
1.	"Tamu… she said God told me to come. … Soon as she came, God made the provision. " -*Sound the Alarm interviews*	Women carrying program vision and administration
2.	"Our oldest daughter had worked with Easter Seal Society, so we had a heart, and someone with a heart to help children with learning disabilities in our community." -*Sound the Alarm interviews*	Women carrying program vision and administration
3.	"We knew young moms who were mostly single mothers that needed to be taught in nurturing. So our programs began to expand." -*Sound the Alarm interviews*	Women-centered program vision
4.	"Being that she was sitting with them, the LORD gave her a brilliant idea: she started this group called 'The Village Keepers.'" -*Deliverance Temple interview*	Women initiating community-sustaining interventions
5.	"Out of that program, The Village Keepers' program, that's where the R.O.O.T.S came into existence." -*Deliverance Temple interviews*	Women initiating community-sustaining interventions

These findings resonate with longstanding theological reflections on shared leadership within the church. Feminist ecclesiology has emphasized that Christian communities often rely on forms of leadership that are relational, collaborative, and

distributed rather than strictly hierarchical. Letty M. Russell argues that the church functions most faithfully when leadership is understood as a communal practice rather than a clerical monopoly. Similarly, Kwok Pui-lan highlights how women's leadership frequently emerges through attentive engagement with the social realities surrounding faith communities. These insights illuminate the patterns observed in this study, where women's discernment and labor operate as essential structures supporting congregational sustainability.

Theme 10: Church-community mutuality as a model of congregational sustainability

Interview data revealed a consistent pattern of church-community mutuality, in which congregations functioned as embedded hubs within the social and relational life of their neighborhoods (see Table 17; for full transcript excerpts see Appendix C-10). Participants described ministries not as attractional programs designed primarily to increase membership, but as responses to identifiable community needs. Within this model, congregational resources—including physical space, volunteer labor, and spiritual support—flow outward into the community, while trust, participation, and relational capital flow back into the life of the church. Through this reciprocal exchange, congregations sustain both community engagement and institutional vitality.

Table 17 - Overview of Church-community mutuality patterns

Theme Section	Core Theme	Number of Interviews	Representative Transcript Evidence	RQ Link
Sustainability	Church - community mutuality as a model of congregational sustainability	6/6	Interview data revealed a consistent pattern of church-community mutuality, in which congregations functioned as embedded hubs within the social and relational life of their neighborhoods.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Reciprocal resource exchange	6/6	Congregational resources—including physical space, volunteer labor, and spiritual support—flow outward into the community, while trust, participation, and relational capital flow back into the life of the church.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Community needs response	6/6	Ministries emerged directly from observed community needs rather than strategies designed primarily to increase church membership.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Relational embeddedness	6/6	Congregational vitality is rooted in relational embeddedness rather than institutional expansion.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Neighborhood anchor role	6/6	Leaders frequently described the church as a safe space or neighborhood anchor, emphasizing its role in strengthening families, supporting youth, and expanding access to resources.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Mutuality as theological orientation	6/6	Mutuality therefore operates as both a theological orientation and an organizational strategy through which congregations maintain relevance and legitimacy within their communities.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives

Participants described numerous initiatives that emerged directly from observed community needs. In both Sound the Alarm Ministries and Deliverance Temple, programs such as daycare services, literacy development initiatives, financial empowerment workshops, and youth mentorship programs were developed to address gaps within local support systems. Leaders explained that these initiatives were motivated by commitments to community well-being rather than strategies designed primarily to increase church membership (see Table 18; for full transcript evidence, see Appendix C-10). Congregations also provided safe gathering spaces for neighborhood events, youth activities, and family support programs. Community members, in turn, contributed volunteer expertise, participated in programs, and strengthened the relational networks surrounding the church. These exchanges illustrate a pattern in which congregations and communities sustain one another through ongoing relational interaction.

Table 18 - Church-community mutual aid as sustainability theme transcript excerpts

	Excerpt	**Network building subtheme/code**
1.	"At that location, a Christian school in the area was closing … the school called us and asked. They said 'we heard that you have a vision for a Christian School; how can we help?'" -*Sound the Alarm interviews*	Educational and institutional networking
2.	"We began to network with the registrar there to take some of our kids who were in 10th Grade and that exposed them to college campuses." -*Sound the Alarm interviews*	Educational and institutional networking

3.	"As a matter of fact, at the time, we took kids from about Grades 6–12 … Even though they had attended the ROOTS program, they were still considered a part of the Aliquippa School District and Aliquippa School District also had a worker that would come in everyday into our program and make sure that we were in compliance with the Aliquippa School District." -*Deliverance Temple interviews*	Community-based institutional embeddedness
4.	"So, we were definitely an extension of the Aliquippa School District." -*Deliverance Temple interviews*	Community-based institutional embeddedness
5.	"Being tied in to the juvenile probation of Beaver County, some were referred to us, court-ordered." -*Deliverance Temple interviews*	School district and justice-system networks

Together these practices demonstrate that congregational vitality in the ministries studied is rooted in relational embeddedness rather than institutional expansion. The church functions not merely as a religious organization located within the neighborhood but as a stabilizing presence participating in the community's social resilience. Leaders frequently described the church as a safe space or neighborhood anchor, emphasizing its role in strengthening families, supporting youth, and expanding access to resources. This pattern also challenges institutional evaluation frameworks that prioritize numerical growth or financial expansion as primary indicators of success. Within the congregations studied, ministry effectiveness is measured through transformed lives, strengthened relationships, and sustained community presence. Mutuality therefore operates as both a theological orientation and an organizational strategy through which congregations maintain relevance and legitimacy within their communities.

This pattern of church-community mutuality resonates with theological and community-development scholarship emphasizing faithful presence, shared participation, and local relational capacity. Samuel Wells's account of "being with" helps frame

ministry not as activity performed for a community from a distance, but as sustained presence within the concrete realities of communal life. Letty Russell's vision of the church "in the round" further clarifies the participatory nature of these relationships, in which ministry is formed through mutuality rather than one-directional service. John McKnight and Peter Block's account of abundant community also helps interpret the significance of local gifts, relationships, and communal assets as resources for sustaining ministry. Together, these perspectives illuminate the mutuality observed in this study, where congregations sustained ministry continuity through reciprocal relationships, local trust, and shared life with the communities they served.

Theme 11: Institutional friction and financial gatekeeping

Interview data revealed a recurring pattern of institutional friction between marginalized Black congregations and denominational evaluation frameworks, particularly around financial expectations for pastoral compensation and congregational sustainability (see Table 19). Participants described denominational structures that often interpret financial capacity—especially pastoral salary thresholds—as a primary indicator of congregational viability. By contrast, leaders within the congregations studied grounded ministry legitimacy in divine calling, community embeddedness, and demonstrated ministry impact. This divergence reflects competing assumptions about what constitutes congregational health and sustainability.

Table 19 - Overview of Navigating institutional friction and financial gatekeeping

Theme Section	Core Theme	Number of Interviews	Representative Transcript Evidence	RQ Link
Sustainability	Navigated institutional friction	6/6	Leaders frequently described the church as a safe space or neighborhood anchor, emphasizing its role in strengthening families, supporting youth, and expanding access to resources.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Institutional marginalization as routine	6/6	Financial constraints, inconsistent denominational support, and the emotional weight of sustaining community programs with minimal resources appeared frequently across interviews.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Sustained despite institutional pressures	6/6	Congregations maintain ministry continuity within Aliquippa's deindustrialized context despite limited denominational support.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Institutional friction navigation	6/6	The fourth subset of research questions explored how congregations sustain ministry within contexts of limited institutional support and structural constraint.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Presence over institutional dependency	6/6	Ministry presence within the community could not be suspended simply because institutional resources were scarce.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives
	Friction as faithful response	6/6	Barriers were consistently narrated as opportunities for faithful response rather than reasons to suspend ministry initiatives.	RQ4: Sustainability narratives

Participants consistently referenced pastoral salary benchmarks as a central evaluative metric within denominational oversight structures. Congregations unable to meet these thresholds were often interpreted as unstable or declining despite active community ministries. Leaders within the congregations studied, however, framed ministry authority differently. They described entering and remaining in ministry contexts because of a perceived divine calling rather than financial viability. Several participants emphasized that congregations operating in economically constrained communities frequently sustain significant community engagement despite limited financial resources (see Table 20; for full transcript evidence, see Appendix C-11). Programs such as the Sound the Alarm and Deliverance Temple daycare initiatives, the ROOTS literacy initiative, and the Y.E.S. Youth program illustrates ministry impact occurring outside dominant financial metrics used within denominational evaluation systems.

Table 20 - Institutional Friction and Financial Gatekeeping Theme Transcript Excerpts

	Excerpt	**Institutional friction and financial gatekeeping subtheme/code**
1.	"Whatever is collected for us that day, we would accept it and keep it moving. Sometimes, it's little or nothing. Sometimes, it's more." -*Deliverance Temple interviews*	Improvised and unstable pastoral compensation
2.	"Most of our pastors are not on salary." -*Deliverance Temple interviews*	Economic disparity between churches
3.	"A lot of our churches are just collecting finances to be able to stay afloat, keep the doors open, keep the lights on, keep the gas on, keep the water running…" -*Deliverance Temple interviews*	Economic disparity between churches

4.	"At that time, we weren't savvy, we didn't know anything about grants. All we had was a desire to help." -*Sound the Alarm interviews*	Restricted access to formal funding infrastructure
5.	"What we did have was not monies that we can really manage their whole household, but looking to God too. So faith is stretched." -*Sound the Alarm interviews*	Restricted access to formal funding infrastructure

Together these narratives reveal a tension between funding-first and vocation-first ecclesiological frameworks. Within denominational structures, financial sustainability often functions as both a prerequisite and indicator of congregational legitimacy. However, within the congregations studied, ministry legitimacy is understood to emerge from faithful response to divine calling and sustained engagement with the surrounding community. This difference in interpretive frameworks shapes how ministry effectiveness is assessed and how oversight practices are implemented. When financial metrics become gatekeeping mechanisms, congregations actively engaged in community transformation may nevertheless be categorized as unsustainable. Participants therefore described institutional friction not simply as administrative disagreement but as a deeper conflict over the criteria by which ministry vitality should be evaluated within economically marginalized contexts.

This tension between institutional structures and contextual ministry realities resonates with missional and practical-theological scholarship that critiques narrow measures of congregational vitality. Michael Goheen's missional theology frames the church not as a static institution but as a community sent into the world to participate in God's mission through life, word, and deed. His emphasis on holistic witness, contextual discernment, humble service, and embodied participation in the life of God's kingdom

challenges dominant models of church growth that prioritize numerical expansion or financial stability. Samuel Wells's theology of "being with" further challenges ministry models that measure effectiveness primarily through control, scale, or visible productivity, emphasizing instead faithful presence and shared life. Hunsberger's narrative account of missional identity further supports this critique by framing mission not as a programmatic layer added to congregational life, but as the story through which the church receives God's word, discerns its calling, and lives as a witness within the world. His emphasis on cultural context, relational history, and communal memory helps explain why marginalized congregations may understand vitality through the story they inhabit and the calling they embody, rather than through institutional scale alone. Justo González's historical-theological treatment of faith and wealth also helps frame the church's relationship to money as a theological question rather than a merely administrative one. Together, these perspectives illuminate the friction observed in this study, where congregations embedded in economically marginalized communities measured ministry health through relational depth, contextual faithfulness, and sustained ministry presence rather than through financial benchmarks alone.

Theme 12: Supernatural guidance and divine resourcing as operational theology

Interview data revealed a consistent pattern in which leaders interpreted ministry development through a theology of **divine guidance** and **providential resourcing**. Participants described property acquisition, program initiation, and financial sustainability as shaped by perceived divine direction and resourcing rather than by strategic planning or capital availability alone (see Table 21). Within this framework,

leaders understood ministry initiatives as cooperative participation with divine agency, where human obedience preceded and often invited material provision.

Table 21 -Overview of Divine resourcing amid scarcity supporting transcript excerpts

Theme Section	Core Theme	Number of Interviews	Representative Transcript Evidence	RQ Link
Sustainability	Divine resourcing amid scarcity	6/6	“Prayer first, provision followed... exact amount needed.” -Sound the Alarm	RQ4: Theological narratives
	Expectant faith in provision	6/6	The church's self-understanding is explicitly theocentric and missional leadership describes the church as an army of few whose members move as one. -Sound the Alarm	RQ4: Theological narratives
	Supernatural provision narratives	6/6	"Lacking the funds to secure the building, they continued to meet in their home until the day a young man... handed them an envelope containing the exact amount needed." -Sound the Alarm	RQ4: Theological narratives
	Faith over financial planning	6/6	"The ministry received no ongoing denominational subsidy and was initially not savvy about grant funding, relying primarily on member tithes, offerings, small donors, and in-kind support." -Sound the Alarm	RQ4: Theological narratives
	Theocentric sustainability	6/6	Stories of intervening in moments of crisis function as concrete embodiments of this vocation. -Deliverance Temple	RQ4: Theological narratives
	Provision as theological witness	6/6	"Obstacles are temporary setbacks, and the task of the church is to keep fighting through, trusting that God is up to something and we are right in the middle of it." -Moreland	RQ4: Theological narratives

Participants frequently recounted prayer practices connected to ministry decisions, including extended prayer vigils over potential ministry sites and collective discernment before pursuing property acquisitions. In one case, leaders described years of prayer surrounding a former school building before a sequence of relational developments led to the property becoming available for ministry use.[152] Similar accounts were shared at Deliverance Temple, where leaders described receiving spiritual confirmation before acquiring the Franklin Avenue facility used for ROOTS programming and a subsequent worship center in Hopewell. Financial provision was also interpreted through this providence framework. Participants described donors appearing at critical moments, funds becoming available for environmental cleanup requirements, and resources emerging sufficient to sustain programs even in the absence of formal grant-writing infrastructure (see Table 22; for full transcript evidence, see Appendix C-12). Leaders often described their work as occurring "underneath God's hand,"[153] emphasizing that human initiative operated as faithful participation rather than autonomous planning.

Table 22 - Supernatural guidance and divine resourcing as sustainability model excerpts

	Excerpt	Divine resourcing amid scarcity subtheme/code
1.	"They gave us that property there to use to reach the community." -*Sound the Alarm Interviews*	Miraculous provision through property and institutional openings

[152] Shymoniak interview
[153] Moreland Interview

2.	"Donors, just folks pouring into us. Seeing our works, seeing our efforts that we thought were so small at that time but pouring finances into our work…" -*Sound the Alarm Interviews*	Provision through people, donors, and giving
3.	"While continuing a Bible study in our home and having a need for finance to secure the building, a young man who had been attending our Bible studies from another denominational church, approached us and gave us the exact amount of monies that we needed to secure the building." -*Sound the Alarm Interviews*	Provision through divine intervention
4.	"The Lord allowed us to secure that building up there… He opened doors where there were no doors. He gave us favor with people that don't know why He gave us favor." -*Deliverance Temple interviews*	Provision through divine intervention
5.	"The support system kicked in for those that were less fortunate, for God always had someone within the ministry and the circle and the family that had resources and means." -*Deliverance Temple interviews*	Provision through divine intervention

Together these narratives reveal a pattern in which divine resourcing functions as operational theology within congregational decision-making. Leaders did not delay ministry initiatives until financial capacity was secured; instead, they frequently initiated programs and pursued property acquisitions in response to perceived divine direction, trusting that provision would follow faithful action. This orientation significantly shaped risk tolerance within the congregations studied. Leaders described undertaking initiatives beyond visible organizational capacity because they believed divine provision accompanied obedience. Importantly, this interpretive framework also reframed scarcity and setbacks. Financial limitations were not interpreted primarily as institutional failure but as contexts requiring deeper discernment and faithfulness. Within this theological orientation, planning and accountability were not rejected but subordinated to spiritual discernment. Ministry strategy therefore emerged through a dynamic interaction between practical decision-making and perceived divine guidance and resourcing.

This pattern reflects theological traditions that understand ministry as participation in God's agency rather than as the product of human strategy alone. Michael Goheen's missional theology frames the church as a sent community whose life, witness, and service participate in the prior mission of God. George Hunsberger's narrative account of missional identity further emphasizes that the church discerns its calling within the story of God's mission, a story that forms the community's identity and capacity for witness. Jürgen Moltmann's pneumatology also supports this interpretation by emphasizing the Spirit's animating presence within the life and mission of the church. These perspectives illuminate the practices observed in this study, where theological trust in divine guidance was not merely devotional language but a practical source of endurance, discernment, and ministry continuity amid material constraint.

Conclusion and Transition into Chapter 4

The integrative analysis of this chapter reveals that the congregations examined in this study, which serve marginalized communities, often operate through a coherent ***ministry ecosystem*** shaped by discernment, place-rooted vocation, women's infrastructural leadership, generational investment in youth, dignity restoration, adaptive resilience, distributed leadership, and an ecclesiology of deep community embeddedness. These findings extend beyond descriptive accounts of congregational life by illuminating structural tensions between contextual ministry practices and dominant institutional evaluative frameworks. If the ecosystem identified in this research reflects coherent theological and organizational practices rather than institutional deficiency, then the implications extend beyond the congregations studied. Rather than depicting such

congregations as organizationally deficient, the findings reveal distinctive theological and relational systems through which ministry emerges and endures. Denominational systems and models may benefit from reexamining the assumptions and evaluative metrics through which congregational vitality and sustainability are assessed.

Accordingly, Chapter 4 moves from descriptive analysis to constructive response, proposing recommendations for how ecclesial institutions, pastoral formation processes, and congregational leadership practices might be recalibrated in light of the theological and organizational patterns revealed in this study. Together, these recommendations seek to strengthen rather than destabilize ministry ecosystems operating within economically and socially constrained contexts.

Chapter 4: Ministry Ecosystems in Marginalized Communities: Interpretation, Recommendations and Implications

Introduction

Chapter 3 presented the findings of this study through twelve themes organized within four analytical domains: origin and founding, leadership formation, membership development, and ministry sustainability. These themes emerged through iterative thematic analysis of interview data, congregational observations, and program documentation drawn from two ministries serving economically marginalized communities in Aliquippa. While presented individually for analytical clarity, the themes collectively reveal a ***coherent ministry ecosystem*** through which the congregations studied navigated the interconnected work of ministry initiation, leadership formation, membership development, and sustainability amid limited resources and uneven institutional support.

At the center of this ecosystem lies a pattern of expectant faith in divine action, expressed through practices of prayerful discernment, faithful waiting, and trust in God's provision—often accompanied by perceived evidence of divine intervention. Surrounding this theological axis are leadership and organizational patterns that sustain congregational life, including place-rooted vocation, women's infrastructural leadership, and the internal formation of ministry leaders. These dynamics, in turn, support ministries that invest in youth, restore dignity to individuals affected by racial and economic disenfranchisement, and cultivate adaptive resilience within economically constrained environments. Together, these patterns illustrate how congregations serving marginalized communities sustain ministry through an interdependent network of spiritual conviction, relational leadership,

and ministry presence. When read collectively, the twelve themes point beyond individual findings toward six broader interpretive patterns:

- Spirit-led discernment as the organizing framework for ministry decisions
- Place-rooted vocation anchoring leaders to marginalized communities
- Women's leadership as foundational and sustaining ministry infrastructure
- Internal leadership formation emerging from within the congregation
- Membership formation through generational investment and dignity restoration
- Faith-based and contextually adaptive resilience

These six patterns emerging from the themes identified in this study also carry broader theological implications. The congregations examined in this research demonstrate ministry models that have emerged within communities shaped by racialized economic exclusion and institutional marginalization. Rather than reflecting organizational deficiency, these ministries reveal *adaptive theological ecosystems* through which congregations cultivate leadership, restore dignity, and sustain community life amid constraint. In particular, the findings highlight the foundational and sustaining role of women's leadership, the generational investment represented by youth-centered ministries, and the restorative posture extended toward individuals whose lives have been shaped by social and economic disenfranchisement. These patterns suggest that congregations in marginalized contexts often embody ecclesial practices that challenge dominant assumptions about how ministry must be structured, evaluated, and sustained, thus revealing a significant interpretive gap between the ministry ecosystems of congregations serving marginalized communities and the institutional frameworks often used by denominational bodies to evaluate congregational health.

The identified six patterns provide the foundation for the recommendations presented in this chapter. Rather than proposing abstract reforms, the recommendations are derived directly from the practices observed within the congregations studied. In this sense, the findings do not merely describe congregational life; they illuminate **practical pathways** through which ministries operating in marginalized contexts can cultivate leadership, form community, and sustain faithful presence. The following sections translate these pathways or patterns into constructive recommendations for denominational structures seeking to strengthen ministry within economically marginalized communities.

Pattern 1: Cultivating Discernment as a Leadership Practice

The findings indicate that Spirit-led discernment functions as a foundational framework guiding ministry decisions within the congregations studied. Leaders consistently described prayer, communal reflection, and spiritual attentiveness as central to determining ministry direction, particularly when conventional institutional indicators such as financial resources or external validation were limited. This pattern suggests that congregational leadership development should intentionally cultivate practices of communal discernment rather than relying exclusively on managerial decision-making models. Leadership teams may benefit from creating structured rhythms of prayer, reflection, and collective listening that allow ministry decisions to emerge from shared spiritual practices.

Denominations seeking to strengthen their leadership capacity may therefore consider integrating discernment practices into leadership meetings, ministry planning processes, and congregational decision-making structures. By cultivating environments in which spiritual attentiveness and communal reflection shape ministry action,

denominations may strengthen both leadership cohesion and vocational clarity. Such **discernment-oriented leadership practices** could include:

- Training denominational leaders to engage congregations through discernment-oriented dialogue
- Recognizing spiritual discernment practices as legitimate components of congregational governance
- Encouraging leadership development models that integrate theological reflection with strategic planning.

Pattern 2: Place-rooted Vocation Anchoring Leadership in Marginalized Communities

A second interpretive pattern emerging from the findings concerns the role of place-rooted vocation in shaping ministry leadership within the congregations studied. Participants consistently framed their ministries not as transferable professional assignments but as callings to specific communities and places. Leaders described remaining in Aliquippa despite economic decline, limited institutional resources, and opportunities to pursue ministry elsewhere. This place-rooted commitment was grounded in theological interpretations of calling that bound leaders to particular neighborhoods and the people who inhabit them. Rather than viewing ministry mobility as a marker of professional advancement, participants described long-term presence within marginalized communities as an expression of vocational faithfulness. This orientation enabled leaders to cultivate deep relational networks and contextual knowledge that strengthened congregational ministries over time. As leaders remained embedded within the community, they developed trust relationships that supported youth initiatives, family ministries, and community partnerships.

These findings suggest that place-rooted vocation functions as a **stabilizing force** within congregations serving marginalized communities. Leadership continuity allows ministries to *develop gradually* through *sustained relational engagement* rather than through short-term programmatic interventions. In this sense, place-rooted leadership represents both a theological conviction and an organizational strategy that supports long-term ministry presence.

Denominational bodies may also consider how institutional structures either support or undermine place-rooted ministry leadership. Systems that prioritize clergy mobility or career advancement may unintentionally weaken congregations serving marginalized communities. Denominations might therefore consider:

- Creating incentives and support structures for **long-term pastoral presence** in economically marginalized contexts
- Developing funding models that support **place-rooted ministry leadership**
- Recognizing **community-rooted leadership continuity** as a marker of congregational health.

Such adjustments may strengthen ministries whose effectiveness depends upon sustained relational presence within particular communities.

Pattern 3: Women's Leadership as Foundational and Sustaining Infrastructure

A third interpretive pattern that emerged across the findings concerns the role of women's leadership as **both foundational and sustaining infrastructure** within the congregations studied. Participant narratives consistently described women as shaping the spiritual environment in which ministries were discerned and launched while also

sustaining the relational, organizational, and programmatic labor necessary for long-term ministry continuity.

During the founding stages of ministry, women frequently functioned as ***foundational infrastructure***, cultivating the prayer practices, relational networks, and discernment environments through which ministry vision emerged. Their spiritual discernment, relational leadership, and organizational initiative often preceded formal institutional decision-making, helping to identify community needs and initiate ministry responses. Over time, women's leadership also functioned as ***sustaining infrastructure*** within congregational life. Participants described women coordinating programs, mentoring youth, maintaining community partnerships, and sustaining relational networks that enabled ministries to continue operating despite financial constraints and institutional pressures. In this sense, women's leadership was not limited to supportive roles but constituted a ***structural backbone*** through which congregational life was ***organized and sustained***.

Taken together, these findings indicate that women's leadership within the congregations studied operates as a continuous infrastructural presence, shaping both the ***origins*** and the ***endurance*** of ministry initiatives. Rather than functioning as occasional contributors, women's discernment, labor, and leadership form a central organizing force within the congregational ecosystems examined in this study. Women's leadership in these congregations is not incidental but **structural**, meaning that congregational life often depends upon leadership forms that operate outside formal clerical hierarchies. Denominations can therefore support women's leadership by implementing initiatives such as:

- Integrating women's discernment practices into congregational governance
- Making women's leadership structurally visible within ministry systems
- Developing women-led apprenticeship and mentoring programs
- Incorporating women's leadership roles into formal ministry descriptions
- Recognizing program leaders, coordinators, and spiritual mentors as part of the leadership ecosystem
- Ensuring women's voices are represented in discernment and decision-making processes
- Providing financial support for community-based initiatives led by women
- Including women's leadership within congregational reporting structures

Such pathways can strengthen the sustainability of ministries already dependent on women's leadership.

Pattern 4: Developing Internal Leadership Pathways

A fourth pattern revealed in the findings is the consistent development of leadership from within the congregation. Rather than relying primarily on external recruitment or professional hiring processes, the ministries studied frequently identified and equipped leaders who were already embedded within the community. This internal leadership formation model expands leadership capacity while maintaining relational continuity with the surrounding community. Because internally developed leaders possess lived familiarity with neighborhood dynamics, congregational culture, and community needs, their leadership often strengthens the congregation's ability to respond adaptively to emerging challenges.

Denominational leaders may therefore consider establishing intentional pathways through which members can grow into leadership roles. These pathways might include:

- Mentorship relationships, ministry apprenticeships, leadership training opportunities, and gradual expansion of responsibilities within existing ministry programs.
- Flexible credentialing pathways recognizing experiential ministry leadership.
- Leadership development resources tailored for congregations serving marginalized communities

Pattern 5: Membership Formation Through Generational Investment and Dignity Restoration

A fifth interpretive pattern emerging from the findings concerns the ways in which congregational membership forms within ministries serving marginalized communities. Interview data revealed that membership development did not occur primarily through traditional attractional strategies or transfer growth from other congregations. Instead, membership formation emerged through sustained engagement with ministries that addressed both **generational vulnerability and human dignity damaged by structural injustice**. Two interrelated dynamics shape this membership pattern:

- First, youth-centered ministries function as ***primary entry pathways into congregational life.*** Programs such as camps, educational initiatives, mentoring programs, and youth development efforts created sustained relationships with children and families in the surrounding community. Through these initiatives, congregations developed long-term relational ties with families who subsequently

became integrated into the life of the church. Investment in children and youth therefore functioned as a generational strategy for rebuilding community life within contexts marked by economic decline and social vulnerability.

- Second, congregations operated as ***spaces of dignity restoration*** for individuals affected by racial and economic disenfranchisement. Participants repeatedly described their ministries as places where individuals whose lives had been shaped by poverty, violence, incarceration, or systemic exclusion could encounter acceptance, support, and restoration. In this sense, congregational life functioned as a counter-structure to broader social environments that often stigmatize or exclude marginalized individuals. The churches studied cultivated environments in which people who might feel unwelcome in more socially privileged congregations were received as participants in a process of spiritual and communal restoration.

Together these dynamics illustrate how membership in the congregations studied emerges through an ecosystem of **generational investment and dignity restoration**. Youth ministries draw families into sustained relationships with the congregation, while the church's restorative posture toward marginalized individuals cultivates belonging among those seeking spiritual and social renewal. These combined practices create congregational environments in which participation gradually develops into membership and co-laborership within the ministry.

Pattern 6: Faith-based and Contextually Adaptive Resilience

A sixth interpretive pattern emerging from the findings concerns the capacity of congregations to sustain ministry through ***faith-based and contextually adaptive resilience*** *within conditions of economic and institutional constraint.* Participants consistently

described ministries operating with limited financial resources, minimal denominational support, and leadership structures dependent on volunteer labor. Despite these constraints, the congregations maintained active ministries serving youth, families, and community members.

Rather than interpreting scarcity as institutional failure, participants framed resource limitations through theological convictions of calling, provision, and perseverance. Leaders described extended seasons in which ministry initiatives were sustained without the financial resources or institutional support typically associated with organizational growth. These seasons were interpreted as periods of faithful waiting upon God's provision. This posture of waiting was not passive resignation, but an active theological orientation expressed through prayer, discernment, and continued ministry engagement. During such periods, congregations adapted creatively by mobilizing volunteer leadership, forming partnerships with community organizations, and developing programs responsive to local needs. These practices suggest that resilience within these congregations emerges through the integration of theological conviction and adaptive leadership rather than through institutional resources alone. Ministry action was sustained by the belief that God was already at work within their circumstances, and that faithful participation would ultimately align with future provision.[154]

This pattern reflects a longstanding biblical and theological tradition in which communities persist through uncertainty while anticipating divine action. Within the congregations studied, ***waiting*** functioned as both *a spiritual discipline and a leadership practice*, enabling ministries to endure extended periods of limitation while maintaining

[154] John 5:17 (NIV).

confidence in eventual provision. As such, congregational sustainability in these contexts *cannot be fully understood apart from the theological imagination through which leaders interpret scarcity, risk, and perseverance.* Waiting upon God therefore functions not merely as devotional practice but as an ***organizing principle*** shaping ministry endurance and decision-making consistent with Isaiah's portrayal of divine strength granted to those who hope in the Lord.

> Do you not know?
> Have you not heard?
> The Lord is the everlasting God,
> the Creator of the ends of the earth.
> He will not grow tired or weary,
> and his understanding no one can fathom.
> He gives strength to the weary
> and increases the power of the weak.
> Even youths grow tired and weary,
> and young men stumble and fall;
> but those who hope in the Lord
> will renew their strength.
> They will soar on wings like eagles;
> they will run and not grow weary,
> they will walk and not be faint. (Isaiah 40:28-31, NIV)

Taken together, these findings suggest that congregational sustainability within marginalized contexts often depends not only on organizational adaptability but also on a theological conviction that <u>*God's work is not always fast*.</u>

Denominational evaluation frameworks often assume that ministry effectiveness will be visible through relatively ***immediate*** indicators such as financial growth or membership expansion. The findings of this study suggest that congregations operating in marginalized contexts may experience *extended seasons of faithful ministry before tangible institutional growth becomes visible.* Participants described seasons of prayerful waiting in which ministry initiatives were sustained despite limited resources, followed by

developments they interpreted as divine provision. Within this interpretive framework, waiting out of faithful obedience to perceived divine calling often precedes visible institutional resources. However, denominational evaluation structures frequently rely on organizational metrics—such as financial stability, programmatic planning, and measurable growth—that assume ministry initiatives should be supported by established resources before they are undertaken. This difference in orientation can create tension between congregations operating through expectant theological frameworks and denominational bodies responsible for institutional oversight.

The findings of this study suggest that denominational systems may benefit from cultivating greater contextual awareness regarding the theological practices of congregations serving marginalized communities. Ministries operating within economically constrained environments often sustain themselves through forms of faith-driven practices that prioritize discernment, obedience, and patient trust in God's supernatural provision over extended periods of scarcity and hardship. Denominations might therefore consider developing evaluation frameworks that recognize long-term faithfulness, community presence and outcomes alongside conventional institutional indicators. Such frameworks could include:

- Valuing sustained ministry engagement within marginalized communities even during extended seasons of limited financial growth
- Recognizing congregational perseverance and vocational commitment as indicators of ministry vitality
- Supporting leadership models that combine discernment practices, relational networks, and adaptive ministry initiatives.

- Supporting ministries whose impact may unfold gradually through relational networks rather than through rapid institutional expansion.

By broadening evaluative frameworks in this way, denominational bodies may better recognize the distinctive forms of ministry life that often emerge within marginalized communities while continuing to provide appropriate oversight and support. Recognizing the role that faithful ***waiting*** and ***divine provision*** plays within the congregational life may help denominational structures better understand how black churches operating in marginalized contexts experience both scarcity and eventual provision within their ongoing participation in God's work; and that understanding may help denominations strengthen relationships with congregations whose theological practices include ***cultivating*** patient trust in divine provision as part of their ministry life.

The Three Contributions of This Study

1. Empirical Contribution: Documenting the ministry ecosystems of two black churches in the marginalized community of Aliquippa

This study provides qualitative documentation of how two congregations in the economically marginalized context of Aliquippa, Pennsylvania actually sustain ministry and community engagement over time. Rather than interpreting these churches through deficit-oriented assumptions—such as limited funding, small membership, or bi-vocational leadership—the findings reveal that these congregations operate through a ***distinct ministry ecosystem*** of relational, spiritual, and organizational practices characterized by: Spirit-led discernment; place-rooted vocation; women's foundational and sustaining leadership; internal leadership formation; youth-centered membership pathways; dignity restoration

for marginalized individuals; and faith-based and contextually adaptive resilience under institutional and economic constraints that enable them to ***sustain long-term engagement*** with their surrounding communities. This empirical contribution matters because many institutional frameworks misunderstand these churches, interpreting them as weak rather than *differently structured*. However, these patterns demonstrate that congregational vitality within marginalized communities does not necessarily depend on the institutional structures *typically* emphasized within dominant denominational frameworks. By documenting these patterns, this study contributes empirical insight into forms of congregational life that are often misunderstood or overlooked within institutional assessments of church vitality.

An additional observation emerging from this research is the striking convergence between the ministry patterns identified in the two congregations studied and the church-planting experience of Refreshing Springs Ministry. Despite the absence of formal collaboration, shared training models, or coordinated ministry strategies, all three congregations demonstrated remarkably similar theological and organizational dynamics. Practices such as discernment-driven leadership, place-rooted vocation, women's infrastructural leadership, youth-centered ministry formation, faith-based and contextually adaptive resilience, and expectant trust in and experience of divine provision appeared consistently across the ministries. This convergence suggests that these patterns *may represent recurring forms of ministry life within Black congregations serving marginalized communities rather than isolated local innovations.*

2. Theological Contribution: Reframing marginalized congregations as sites of ecclesial wisdom

The findings of this study suggest that congregations operating under constraint are not merely surviving but ***embody theologically coherent practice***s shaped by their context. These practices include: discernment-driven governance; restorative approaches to membership; relational rather than bureaucratic leadership structures; commitment to community rootedness; and sustained attentiveness to the movement of the Holy Spirit within the life of the community. This *challenges the assumption that dominant institutional models represent the normative or ideal form of church life.* Instead, the results of this research suggest that marginalized congregations often ***preserve forms of ecclesial wisdom shaped by contextual discernment, resilience, and communal solidarity***. By recognizing these practices as coherent theological expressions rather than adaptations to deficiency, this study reframes marginalized congregations as important sources of practical theological insight for the wider church.

3. Practical Contribution: Recommendations for denominational engagement

The patterns identified in this study also carry practical implications for denominational bodies seeking to engage congregations serving economically marginalized communities. The findings suggest that institutional frameworks may benefit from reassessing assumptions about how congregational vitality is formed and sustained in such contexts. Denominations may therefore consider *developing evaluative frameworks that recognize forms of leadership and ministry not always captured by traditional institutional metrics.* This includes recognizing distributed leadership structures,

particularly the foundational and sustaining roles played by women within congregational life; supporting internally developed leadership pipelines that emerge through participation in ministry; and investing in youth-centered initiatives that function as primary pathways of membership formation within marginalized communities.

Additionally, denominational bodies may benefit from *reexamining evaluation metrics that prioritize financial capacity* or pastoral compensation as primary indicators of congregational viability. As the congregations examined in this study demonstrate, ministry ecosystems sustained through relational networks, community partnerships, Spirit-led discernment and faith-based and contextually adaptive resilience can produce long-term community impact even within contexts of significant economic constraint. Recognizing these ministry ecosystems as *legitimate expressions of congregational vitality* may help denominational institutions more accurately engage and support churches serving marginalized communities.

Although this chapter centers on recommendations for denominational structures, the findings of this study indicate that ministry ecosystems within marginalized communities do not operate in isolation from other ecclesial actors. Congregations, community leaders, and theological education institutions participate in overlapping and interdependent processes of leadership formation, ministry development, and theological reflection. For this reason, the implications of this study cannot be confined exclusively to denominational systems. The patterns identified here also generate important considerations for participating congregations and community leaders, as well as for theological education institutions. The following sections therefore extend the discussion beyond denominational recommendations to briefly consider how these additional actors

may more intentionally recognize, articulate, and engage the ministry practices already present within marginalized contexts.

Implications for Participating Congregations and Community Leaders

Recognizing and articulating community-based leadership and ministry formation.

The findings of this study reveal that congregations serving marginalized communities often develop substantial theological insight, pastoral wisdom, and sustainable ministry practices outside formal seminary structures. Within these contexts, leadership and ministry formation frequently occurs through lived ministry experience, mentorship within the congregation, and contextual theological reflection rooted in the realities of the surrounding community. While these practices effectively sustain ministry in marginalized contexts, they are often *transmitted informally* and may not always be intentionally identified or articulated as leadership formation processes.

This study therefore invites congregations and ministry leaders serving marginalized communities to consider ***intentionally identifying and naming the recurring leadership and ministry practices*** present within their ministries. By reflecting on successful patterns of pastoral care, community engagement, resource stewardship, and congregational sustainability that ***consistently emerge*** within these contexts, congregations may begin to recognize the forms of leadership and ministry formation that are already taking place within their ministry ecosystems.

Articulating these patterns may ***create opportunities for communities to develop*** more intentional *pathways* through which emerging leaders are mentored and equipped for ministry within similar contexts. Such efforts could help ensure that the practical wisdom and theological insight developed through lived ministry in marginalized communities are

preserved, strengthened, and transmitted to future generations of leaders. The ministry patterns documented in this research provide one example of how recurring practices within marginalized congregations may serve as a *foundation* for *recognizing and strengthening* these *community-rooted forms of leadership and ministry formation*.

Implications for Theological Education Institutions

Partnership with marginalized ministry communities in leadership and ministry formation.

While theological seminaries have historically functioned as the primary institutions responsible for clergy preparation, this research suggests that the central role of seminary education is not the exclusive production of ministerial wisdom but the **standardization and credentialing of theological knowledge within recognized ecclesial systems**. Through this process, seminaries establish shared frameworks that allow denominations and institutions to recognize leaders who have been trained according to commonly accepted standards. However, the findings of this study indicate that congregations located within marginalized communities often develop substantial theological insight, pastoral wisdom, and sustainable ministry practices *outside formal seminary structures*. In these contexts, leadership and ministry formation frequently occurs through lived ministry experience, mentorship within the community, and contextual theological reflection. While these forms of formation are effective within their contexts, they often remain **informal and unstandardized**, limiting their recognition within broader ecclesial systems. In light of these findings, this study therefore recommends that theological education institutions explore collaborative partnerships with congregations serving marginalized communities in order to better understand the leadership and ministry

formation processes already occurring within these ministry contexts. Such partnerships could create opportunities for seminaries to learn from the lived ministry experiences of these communities while also contributing institutional resources that help translate these practices into *more widely recognized forms of leadership and congregational development* through the *intentional identification and articulation of recurring leadership practices within congregations serving marginalized communities*.

Through collaborative engagement, seminaries and community-based ministries may be able to work together to identify recurring leadership and congregational practices, and explore ways *these patterns might inform* the ***development of contextual curricula, mentorship models, or training pathways*** designed specifically for leaders serving marginalized communities. Such pathways would not replicate traditional seminary structures but would instead organize the *knowledge already present* within marginalized ministry ecosystems into ***accessible forms of instruction and mentorship***. The ministry patterns documented in this research provide an initial example of how recurring practices within marginalized congregations might inform the development of such contextual leadership formation models. Over time, the development of these contextual pathways could support community-based initiatives for theological education ***designed specifically for leaders serving marginalized communities***. In this way, leadership and ministry formation may emerge not only through institutional theological education but also through the lived ministry ecosystems of congregations themselves**.**

Additionally, theological education institutions can participate in a broader ecosystem of leadership and congregational formation that recognizes and builds upon the ***wisdom already present within marginalized congregational contexts***.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that congregations serving marginalized communities often sustain ministry through interdependent spiritual, relational, and organizational practices that are not always recognized within dominant institutional frameworks. Spirit-led discernment, place-rooted vocation, women's foundational and sustaining leadership, youth-centered generational investment, restorative approaches to human dignity, and faith-based and contextually adaptive resilience together ***form an ecosystem*** through which congregational life emerges and endures. These patterns reveal that ministries operating within contexts of economic and social constraint are not simply struggling versions of dominant church models but represent coherent expressions of ecclesial life ***shaped by their historical and communal realities***. Rather than reflecting institutional deficiency, the congregations studied demonstrate forms of *theological imagination and communal resilience* that enable sustained ministry presence within communities marked by hardship and hope. This challenges the assumption that dominant institutional models represent the normative or ideal form of church life. Instead, the churches studied reveal that marginalized congregations often preserve **forms of ecclesial wisdom shaped by contextual discernment, resilience and communal solidarity**. Recognizing and supporting these ministry ecosystems offers an opportunity for denominational bodies to cultivate practices that more faithfully reflect the church's calling to participate in God's restorative work within marginalized communities. By attending more closely to the theological and organizational patterns already present within such congregations, denominational institutions may begin to bridge the gap between inherited *institutional assumptions and the contextual realities* shaping ministry life on the margins.

Implications for Future Research

While this study provides qualitative insight into the ministry ecosystems sustaining congregations serving marginalized communities, several areas warrant further investigation. One area raised directly by participants concerns the relationship between formal theological education and leadership formation within such congregations. Leaders in these congregations developed and sustained extensive ministry ecosystems—including prayer and spiritual discernment practices, youth education programs, community development initiatives, leadership networks, adaptive frameworks and congregational ministries—without relying on formal seminary training. Reflecting on this reality, participants raised a direct question: ***if these ministries have been successfully established and sustained without formal theological education, is seminary education necessary for leaders emerging from these communities?***

This question arises from the lived experience of leaders whose ministries have demonstrated long-term stability and measurable community impact within economically marginalized contexts. The congregations examined in this study developed robust leadership structures, youth development initiatives, and community-based programs through internally formed leadership networks shaped by spiritual discernment, relational trust, and sustained engagement with the surrounding community. For participants, the success of these ministries raise a significant question about how theological formation occurs and how ministerial knowledge is cultivated within congregational life. Future research may therefore explore the extent to which ministry ecosystems within marginalized communities ***function as sites of theological formation in their own right***. Such studies could examine how leadership capacity, theological reflection, and pastoral

competence emerge through long-term participation in congregational life, particularly within communities shaped by racialized economic marginalization and historical patterns of resilience.

Additional comparative studies could also examine whether the ministry patterns identified in this research—Spirit-led discernment, place-rooted vocation, women's foundational and sustaining leadership, internal leadership development, youth-centered membership formation and dignity restoration, faith-based and contextually adaptive resilience—appear in other congregations serving marginalized communities beyond Aliquippa. If similar patterns are observed across multiple contexts, this would further support the possibility that such congregations embody *recurring forms of ecclesial life that have not yet been fully recognized within dominant institutional frameworks*.

Additional studies could explore how denominational evaluation frameworks *influence* congregational sustainability in economically marginalized contexts. In particular, further research could examine how financial benchmarks, pastoral compensation expectations, and institutional assessment practices shape denominational perceptions of congregational health and viability. Such inquiry may also help clarify how these evaluation models influence the trajectories of congregational stability over time, including the ways they may both *support and unintentionally constrain* ministries whose organizational structures and resource patterns differ from dominant institutional expectations.

Finally, future research might also examine how denominational structures and theological institutions interpret, evaluate, and respond to congregations whose ministry ecosystems ***develop*** outside conventional models of pastoral formation, financial

sustainability, and institutional evaluation. Such inquiry may help clarify how broader ecclesial systems can more accurately understand and engage the ***forms of ministry life already emerging*** *within marginalized communities*.

Bibliography

Baltimore Presbytery. "Presbytery of Baltimore Approves Groundbreaking Reparative Justice Fund." Press release, September 13, 2025. https://baltimorepresbytery.org/reparative-justice-fund.

Beaver-Butler Presbytery. "Churches in Our Presbytery." Accessed February 5, 2026. http://beaverbutler.org/churches-in-our-presbytery/.

Carey, Holly J. *Women Who Do: Female Disciples in the Gospels*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2023.

Data USA. "Aliquippa, PA." Accessed January 11, 2026.

Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland. "Rust and Renewal: A Pittsburgh Retrospective." Accessed January 11, 2026.

Garces-Foley, Kathleen. "Multiethnic Congregations." Institute for Faith and Learning, Baylor University, 2022.

Goheen, Michael W. *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011.

Goheen, Michael W. *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018.

Goheen, Michael W. *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History, and Issues*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014.

González, Justo L. *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990.

Hartford Institute for Religion Research. "Megachurch Research." Accessed April 6, 2026. https://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/.

Hirsch, Alan, and Mike Breen. *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009.

Hunsberger, George R. *The Story That Chooses Us: A Tapestry of Missional Vision*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015.

Jennings, Willie James. *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020.

Jennings, Willie James. *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010.

Kwok, Pui-lan. *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.

LifeWay Research. African-American Church Planting Research Report: For Presbyterian Church in America—MNA. 2012. Accessed January 14, 2026. https://2019.pcamna.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2013/08/African-American-Church-Planting-Final-Report-PCA-MNA.pdf.

LifeWay Research. "LifeWay Research Studies African-American Church Plants." LifeWay News, September 2, 2013.

Lincoln, C. Eric, and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990.

Luhr, Eileen. "Megachurches, Suburbia and the Prosperity Gospel." *Utne Reader*, August 2015.

McGavran, Donald A. *Understanding Church Growth*. Updated ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980.

McKnight, John, and Peter Block. *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010.

Moltmann, Jürgen. *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977.

Moreland, Marvin. Interview by Oghene'tega Violet Ogbon (Swann). Aliquippa, PA, February 2026.

Newbigin, Lesslie. *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church*. London: SCM Press, 1953.

Owens Rainey, Joel. "A Comparison of the Effectiveness of Selected Church Planting Models Measured by Conversion Growth and New Church Starts." EdD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005.

Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. *Deindustrialized Communities Market Study: Final Report*. Accessed January 11, 2026.

Presbyterian Church in America Missions to North America. "Church Planter Compensation Package Formation Guidelines." February 18, 2010.

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Office of Mission Program Grants. "Growth Grant Application for New Worshiping Communities." Revised January 2025. https://pcusa.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/Growth%20Grant%20Application%20rev.%20January%202025%5B1%5D.pdf.

Presbyterian Mission Agency. “New Worshiping Communities Funding and Support.” Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Accessed April 6, 2026. https://www.pcusa.org/.

Russell, Letty M. *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.

Shymoniak, Rich. Interview by Oghene’tega Violet Ogbon (Swann). Aliquippa, PA, February 26, 2026.

Shymoniak, Vera. Interview by Oghene’tega Violet Ogbon (Swann). Aliquippa, PA, February 26, 2026.

Stetzer, Ed. *Planting Missional Churches*. 2nd ed. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016.

Stetzer, Ed, and Warren Bird. “The State of Church Planting in the United States: Research Overview and Qualitative Study of Primary Church Planting Entities.” *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 19, no. 2 (2008): 1–42.

Stetzer, Ed, and Warren Bird. Viral Churches: Helping Church Planters Become Movement Makers. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.

Synod of the Trinity. “Beaver-Butler Presbytery Will Always Be Part of Adams’ Family.” September 14, 2018. https://www.syntrinity.org/featured/beaver-butler-presbytery-will-always-be-part-of-adams-family/.

Synod of the Trinity. “October 2021 Synod Assembly: Rhythm of the Synod.” November 4, 2021. https://www.syntrinity.org/featured/october-2021-synod-assembly-rhythm-of-the-synod/.

Tang, Len. “Church Plants as Evangelism Laboratories.” *Fuller Studio*. Accessed January 24, 2026. https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/theology/church-plants-as-evangelism-laboratories.

The Allegheny Front. “Beaver County Population, Employment Decline Despite Taxpayer Investment in Shell Cracker.” February 13, 2025. Accessed January 11, 2026.

U.S. Census Bureau. “QuickFacts: Aliquippa City, Pennsylvania.” Accessed January 11, 2026. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/aliquippacitypennsylvania.

van Driel, Edwin Chr. “To Be Gathered Is to Be Sent.” Unpublished manuscript. Accessed October 25, 2026. https://www.academia.edu/18517370/To_Be_Gathered_Is_To_Be_Sent.

Villafañe, Eldin. *Seek the Peace of the City: Reflections on Urban Ministry*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.

Von der Ruhr, Marc, and Joseph P. Daniels. “A Model of Religious Investment to Explain the Success of ‘Megachurches.’” Working paper, May 2008. Accessed January

8, 2026. https://www.academia.edu/54632248/A_Model_of_Religious_Investment_to_Explain_the_Success_of_Megachurches.

Wells, Samuel. *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015.

Yin, Robert K. *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*. 6th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2018.

Yong, Amos. *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008.

Zscheile, Dwight J. *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age*. New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2024.

Appendices

Appendix Structure Summary

Appendix	Content	Word/Pages	Files Referenced
A	Interview protocol + consent	3+3 pages	Methodology from Ch. 3 + Swann-approved IRB form-Jan28-2026
B	Theme matrix + codebook	11+10 pages	My coding tables ThemeSection-CoreTheme-Interviews-RepresentativeTranscripts
C	Key transcript excerpts (Sound the Alarm, Deliverance Temple)	32 pages	Raw transcripts Transcription-Shymoniaks-Feb-26, 2026 Transcription-Moreland-Feb-26, 2026 Transcription-Deliverance Temple-Feb-26, 2026 Transcription-Sound the Alarm-Feb-26, 2026

Appendix A: Interview Protocol + Consent

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
RESEARCH PROTOCOL PROPOSAL
Doctor of Ministry Degree
Pittsburgh Theological Seminary

1. **Date of submission—**January 23, 2026

2. **Name(s) and contact information**
   a. **Student**: Rev. Oghene'tega Violet Ogbon (Swann)
   b. **Faculty mentor and first reader:** Dr. Scott Hagley
   c. **Title of research project:** Empowering the Margins: Exploring Church Planting and Sustainability by Socioeconomically Disenfranchised Black Communities in Majority-White Mainline Denominations
3. **Research period**
   a. Beginning date of interacting with human subjects: **January 30, 2026**
   b. Ending date of interacting with human subjects: **February 27, 2026**
   c. Sessions and length of time involved: **2-3 sessions of 60-90 minutes each**

4. **Nature and purpose of research**
   a. What do you hope to learn?
   This study aims to learn how historically marginalized Black communities actively engage in the establishment, leadership, and sustainability of church planting within majority-white mainline denominational contexts. Specifically, it seeks to understand the unique strategies, leadership models, and community dynamics that contribute to the vitality and perseverance of these church plants, particularly in settings marked by limited socioeconomic and institutional resources. The research also aims to explore how existing church planting paradigms may or may not align with the lived realities and theological expressions of these communities. Through this inquiry, the study hopes to generate biblically and theologically informed recommendations that affirm and support marginalized church planting praxis and leadership.

   b. Why are you conducting this research?
   I am conducting this research to address a significant gap in scholarly and ecclesial understanding regarding the experiences, strengths, and challenges faced by marginalized Black congregations in church planting. These communities have historically been under-resourced and under-represented in mainstream denominational research and support structures. By illuminating their experiences and effective leadership practices, this study seeks to contribute to a more just and inclusive ecclesiology that recognizes and uplifts the diverse expressions of God's mission. The findings intend to provide practical insights for denominational bodies, theological educators, and ministry practitioners, equipping them to better affirm and sustain church plants arising from marginalized communities. Ultimately, the research aligns with Pittsburgh Theological Seminary's mission to cultivate ministry effectiveness across diverse contexts through rigorous theological reflection and contextual

praxis.

c. What is your research question?

How do disenfranchised communities of color, especially black communities participate in the establishment and sustainability of church planting without the socioeconomic resources, institutional support, and established networks available to more affluent communities and churches?

What is your thesis?

Disenfranchised communities of color, particularly Black communities, embody God's mission of church planting through contextualized leadership, spiritual resilience, and communal empowerment, demonstrating how ordinary people in marginalized contexts sustain vibrant worshipping communities that defy socioeconomic limitations.

5. Research methods and procedures

a. What are the methods you will use to gather data? List the specific interviews, tests, observations you will use? *(Please attach any and all survey instruments you will use; and include all of the questions you will ask.)*

This qualitative study will primarily use semi-structured interviews as the data collection method. The researcher will conduct individual interviews with the leadership of two non-connected, predominantly Black churches that bear similarity to the founding and sustainability model of the Refreshing Springs Ministry. The interviews will focus on four key areas: origin/founding, leadership structures, membership dynamics, and sustainability practices of each congregation.

The interview questions will be open-ended to allow participants to share rich, detailed narratives. Questions include:

- Can you describe how your church was founded or started?
- How is leadership structured and enacted within your congregation?
- How would you characterize your church membership and community engagement?
- What practices or strategies have helped sustain your church over time?

The interviews will be conducted either face-to-face or via secure Zoom videoconferencing, depending on participants' preferences and availability. Each session will be audio recorded with participant consent to ensure accurate data capture.
(Note: The complete set of interview questions is appended to the IRB application.)

b. How will you recruit participants?

Participants will be recruited purposively based on their leadership roles within the two selected churches in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania. The churches were chosen due to their demographic and ecclesial similarities to the research site, Refreshing Springs Ministry. Initial contact will be made through established denominational and ministerial networks, explaining the study's purpose and inviting participation. Interested leaders will be provided with informed consent forms detailing study procedures and voluntary participation rights.

c. How will you keep records? *(Include specifics about recording, written notes, observations, participants' journals, etc.)*.

All interviews will be audio recorded using secure, password-protected digital recording

devices or software to ensure data security. The recordings will be transcribed verbatim by the researcher. All digital files, including audio recordings, transcriptions, and consent documents, will be stored on encrypted, password-protected drives accessible only to the researcher and project advisor. Physical documents, such as signed consent forms, will be stored in locked filing cabinets within the researcher's secure office.

6. Your relationship to potential participants (e.g., teacher, pastor, spiritual director, friend)

a. Are you their pastor/priest, teacher, spiritual director, friend, etc.?

Answer: Ministry colleague.

b. How will you be mindful for the relationship and the power dynamics?

As a ministry colleague rather than a direct pastoral authority or supervisor, I will maintain clear boundaries that respect participant autonomy. Consent will be sought with full disclosure about the voluntary nature of participation, and participants will be assured that their decision to participate or not will have no bearing on any professional or ministry relationship. I will strive to create a safe, open environment enabling honest dialogue without perceived pressure or obligation.

c. How does that impact your project?

This collegial relationship supports open communication while reducing the risk of coercion or undue influence, thereby enhancing the integrity and trustworthiness of the qualitative data collected.

7. Potential risks to participants

a. What are the potential harm to participants? (e.g. potential infringement on privacy).

The primary potential risk is sensitive information relating to church dynamics, leadership, or internal challenges. There is also a minimal risk of discomfort or unease in discussing personal or organizational issues. These risks are mitigated by confidentiality protocols.

b. Will you be working with vulnerable populations (e.g., children, incarcerated persons, people with disabilities)?

No. Participants are adult ministry leaders who do not fall into vulnerable or protected populations such as minors, incarcerated people, or people with disabilities.

c. How do you plan to reduce and respond to participant risks?

I will ensure informed consent with detailed explanation of risks and protections before participation. Interviews will be conducted in safe, private environments, with confidentiality assured. Participants can skip any question or withdraw at any time. Data will be anonymized, and any identifying information will be removed or coded. In the event of participant distress, I will pause or stop the interview and provide appropriate referrals if desired.

8. Potential benefits to participants

a. What are the potential benefits to participants? (e.g. spiritual formation).

Participants will have occasions for reflective dialogue about their ministry contexts, which can contribute to their spiritual and leadership formation. They will also gain the opportunity to influence practical recommendations that may benefit their congregation and similar ministries in the future.

b. How do you plan to ensure voluntary participation, with no coercion or favors?

Participation will be strictly voluntary, with no incentives or pressure. Consent forms clearly state there are no penalties or rewards tied to participation and that they may decline or withdraw freely at any point.

9. Assurance of confidentiality and anonymity

a. How will you assure anonymity? Will you use pseudonyms or coding of participant names and data?

The leaders of the churches in my research have formally requested that their names and the names of their congregations be used in the study in order to facilitate future engagement, accessibility, and theological education.

A voluntary waiver of anonymity clause has been added to the form to honor this request.

b. How will you assure confidentiality?

Audio recordings, transcripts, and consent forms will be securely stored in encrypted, password-protected digital locations accessible only to the research team. Paper documents will be kept in locked filing cabinets.

c. How will you use, store, and dispose of personal data?

Data will be used solely for research purposes. After the study, recordings will be destroyed, transcripts stored securely for a defined retention period (e.g., 5 years), and then securely deleted or shredded. Data handling will comply with institutional and federal privacy guidelines.

10. Dissemination of research

a. How will you share your research, data, and findings?

Findings will be shared in written form to my doctoral cohort, readers, and denominational leadership. Summaries or presentations may be offered to participating congregations.

b. Will you present it to your cohort? Readers?

Yes, to my project Readers as part of the Doctor of Ministry process.

c. Will you present to a congregation?

Potentially, at the request of participating churches or denominational bodies.

d. Will it be accessible in the PTS library? Online?

Yes, the final approved project will be archived and accessible through the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary library and digital repositories.

e. Do you intend to publish your work further?

Probably, through independent, denominational publications or academic ministry journals, depending on what's available and affordable to me.

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY
PITTSBURGH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH TITLE:
Empowering the Margins: Exploring Church Planting and Sustainability by Socioeconomically Disenfranchised Black Communities in Majority-White Mainline Denominations

INTRODUCTION:
My name is _____, and I am a Doctor of Ministry student in the Missional Leadership program at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

My phone number is _____. My email is _____.

My faculty mentor/research advisor is _____. His phone number is _____. His email is _____. The study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary chaired by _____ (email:_____; tel:_____).

Feel free to contact any of us at any time if you have questions at any point about this project.

PURPOSE:
The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences, leadership, and sustainability practices of Black congregations in socioeconomically marginalized communities. The focus is to develop biblically and theologically grounded recommendations to support church planting and flourishing in the contexts of your congregational community.

I am trying to learn more about how historically marginalized Black communities actively engage in the establishment, leadership, and sustainability of church planting within majority-white mainline denominational contexts. Specifically, it seeks to understand the unique strategies, leadership models, and community dynamics that contribute to the vitality and perseverance of these church plants, particularly in settings marked by limited socioeconomic and institutional resources. The research also aims to explore how existing church planting paradigms may or may not align with the lived realities and theological expressions of these communities. Through this inquiry, the study hopes to generate biblically and theologically informed recommendations that affirm and support marginalized church planting praxis and leadership.

The anticipated title of the study will be, “Empowering the Margins: Exploring Church Planting and Sustainability by Socioeconomically Disenfranchised Black Communities in Majority-White Mainline Denominations”

PROCEDURE:
If you consent to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in the following ways and make the following commitments:

- Participate in 2-3, 45-60 minutes interview

I may also make a video recording of your participation. If so, after the project is completed, I will destroy all audio and video recordings.

TIME REQUIRED:

The project will begin on January 30, 2026, and conclude on February 27, 2026. You are being asked to commit 2-3 hours of your time.

VOLUNTARINESS:
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may still decline to be part of any session or answer any question that you do not wish to engage. You are completely free to withdraw from the study at any time.

RISKS:
I do not anticipate any risks associated with this study. In any human subject research involving self-disclosure, there is always the possibility that you may feel discomfort or distress in the course of the research. If this happens, please inform me immediately and decline to participate if you wish.

BENEFITS:
I anticipate the following possible benefits to you and/or your congregation:

- You will have the opportunity to reflect on and share unique experiences, strengths, and challenges of church planting and ministry in your context.
- Your insights will directly inform recommendations intended to support church planters, congregations, and denominational leaders working in similar communities, helping to shape practical guidelines for sustainable and contextually grounded ministry.
- Participants will be invited to review and discuss the study's findings and proposed recommendations, ensuring that the results are accurate, meaningful, and relevant to your lived realities.
- Your contribution will serve as an affirmation of the importance and vitality of church plants initiated and led by marginalized communities, amplifying your voice in broader denominational and theological conversations.

By participating, you and your congregation may help promote a deeper understanding and wider support for church planting among historically under-resourced and marginalized groups in the wider church and society.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY:
I will be the only researcher present during the study. I will be the only person who sees/listens to any of its recordings. I will not share personal information that you shared in the interview but do not wish to be included in the interview. The identity of all participants will be anonymous and protected in final paper, except where a participant strictly and voluntarily permits the use of their real identity. Except otherwise requested and permitted by the participant, pseudonyms (made-up names) will be used to represent participants and the data from all interviews will be coded to prevent association with any identifiable individual.

Participant Waiver of Anonymity
By providing my initials here, I am acknowledging and giving permission for the use of my name and the name of my ministry in the final study. _____

SHARING THE RESULTS:
I anticipate that the results of this research will be shared in the following ways: in my written final project paper for my degree program, and also by email with participants who provide a written request for it.

In the future, I might also publish my research as a book, and or refer to it in published writings. In such cases, I will continue to honor the confidentiality terms stipulated in this research, and only further alter identifying details to further protect the identity and anonymity of participants and their communities.

BEFORE YOU SIGN:
By signing below, you agree to participate in this project with the possibility of being audio-taped, videotaped, and your words being written in a final paper. Be sure that you are fully satisfied with the answers to any questions you may have before signing. If you agree to participate in this study, you will receive a copy of this document. I will keep a copy until the project is completed and then destroy it.

Participant's printed name: _____

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's printed name: **_____**

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix B: Codebook

Note: The codebook below presents the first-cycle and second-cycle analytic codes used in the iterative coding process. These codes informed, but do not duplicate one-for-one, the final twelve-theme structure presented in Chapter 3 and Appendix C. Several related codes were later clustered into broader interpretive themes during the final stage of analysis.

Code No	Domain	Code Name	Operational Definition	Include When	Exclude When	Example / Anchor Quote	Frequency	Primary Sources
1	Origins & Founding	Prayer preceding	Decisions are initiated through prayer, prophecy, and discernment before strategic action is taken.	Include statements about waiting on God, prophetic leading, prayer before launching, or divine instruction.	Exclude generic prayer references not tied to decisions.	"The Lord directed us"; "Prayer first"	28	file:43,file:44,file:47
2	Origins & Founding	Divine direction	Founding and movement are narrated as led by God rather than by market logic or institutional strategy.	Include call narratives, divine summons, or language of being sent/led.	Exclude ordinary planning language with no theological claim.	"began to lead us to establish"	18	file:47,file:40,file:42

3	Origins & Founding	Prophetic confirmation	An external or communal spiritual confirmation validates a sensed call, place, or decision.	Include confirming prophecy, repeated messages, or shared discernment.	Exclude private intuition without confirmation.	"God confirmed through prophecy"	14	file:47,file:40
4	Origins & Founding	Geographic commitment	The church is rooted in a specific place as vocation, often against easier alternatives.	Include language of being called back, sent here, or staying despite hardship.	Exclude simple residency facts.	"why would you send us here?"	16	file:46,file:40,file:41
5	Origins & Founding	Relational rooting	Place attachment is mediated through relationships, neighborhood knowledge, and long-term presence.	Include references to community ties, knowing people, or rooted presence.	Exclude abstract place theology detached from relationships.	"led back to Kennedy Blvd building"	12	file:46,file:41
6	Origins & Founding	Gate of the city	A site is interpreted as divine missional locus and a spiritually strategic missional entry point for ministry.	Include explicit "gate" language or descriptions of key city access points.	Exclude ordinary property descriptions.	"Gate to Aliquippa"	18	file:43,file:44,file:40

7	Origins & Founding	Historical consciousness	The founding story is interpreted in light of deindustrialization, deprivation, and community decline.	Include references to steel mill closure, poverty, abandonment, or social decline shaping call.	Exclude generic hardship statements with no historical framing.	"In deprived areas... my glory shines greatest"	15	file:46,file:40,file:41
8	Leadership Formation	Informal/hidden leadership	Leadership is exercised informally or prior to formal recognition, often by marginalized actors.	Include behind-the-scenes guidance, informal initiative, or pre-office leadership.	Exclude only formal titles with no evidence of hidden influence.	"prayed over site years before"	13	file:45,file:41
9	Leadership Formation	Leadership formation through network building	Leadership develops through relational webs, home studies, partnerships, and informal ecclesial connections.	Include references to building networks across people, ministries, or community sectors.	Exclude one-time contacts without sustained relational function.	"women held networks"	17	file:45,file:5,file:41
10	Leadership Formation	Program initiation	Leadership is expressed by launching ministries that meet concrete communal needs.	Include daycare, school, parenting support, youth programs, or outreach initiatives.	Exclude maintenance of existing ministry without founding impulse.	"Started daycare, Hope Center"	19	file:45,file:40,file:42

11	Leadership Formation	Women's spiritual-relational leadership	Women sustain ministry through prayer, care, discernment, and relational authority.	Include maternal, intercessory, nurturing, and spiritually directive roles shaping ministry.	Exclude generic mention of women without leadership function.	"Interceding for family... divine connection"	11	file:45,file:40
12	Leadership Formation	Communal governance	Leadership decisions are made through shared prayer and collective discernment rather than unilateral command.	Include elder meetings, group prayer, collective anointing, or communal decision structures.	Exclude solo decisions by one leader.	"board of five elders who meet monthly for prayer and decision making"	15	file:47,file:40,file:42
13	Leadership Formation	Prayer-led consensus	Consensus forms through spiritual discernment and agreement, not merely procedure.	Includes board/elder prayer, unity after discernment, or consensus through prayer.	Exclude voting language without discernment.	"board of five elders who meet monthly for prayer and decision making"	18	file:41,file:48
14	Leadership Formation	Scaffolded emergence	Leaders are formed gradually through service in multiple roles before formal office.	Includes serving in many roles, being raised up over time, or leadership through practice.	Exclude sudden appointment narratives with no developmental path.	"served in every role—van driver, janitor"	21	file:48,file:3,file:6,file:41

15	Leadership Formation	Vocational anchoring	Leaders remain committed to a specific ministry context despite pressure to leave.	Includes refusal to relocate, staying in hardship, or deep calling to place.	Exclude temporary service or ambiguous presence.	"called back to this place"	12	file:46,file:41
16	Leadership Formation	Leadership resilience under constraint	Prayer, calling, and theological conviction sustain leadership through ambiguity and adversity.	Includes narratives of endurance, persistence, and spiritual stamina.	Exclude simple optimism without adversity.	"He holds you there"	16	file:47,file:40,file:41
17	Membership Formation	Mutual aid	Membership life is sustained through practical sharing such as tithes, stipends, childcare, transport, or material help.	Includes material care among members and community-serving economic exchange.	Exclude private charity not tied to communal life.	"Lowest cost daycare"	22	file:43,file:44,file:40,file:41
18	Membership Formation	Belonging through service	Members are incorporated through active participation in ministries rather than passive attendance.	Include teaching, volunteering, caregiving, mentoring, transporting, or helping.	Exclude attendance-only references.	"pour in the word... giving them jobs"	17	file:40,file:41

19	Membership Formation	Formation through work	Spiritual and social formation occurs through ministry labor, responsibility, and practical skill-building.	Include training in resumes, parenting, teaching, work ethic, or apprenticeships.	Exclude abstract discipleship with no practice component.	"match teenagers with career aims"	16	file:40,file:41,file:48
20	Membership Formation	Character formation	Congregational life intentionally shapes moral, relational, and practical habits.	Include parenting seminars, etiquette, discipline, faithfulness, and nurturing language.	Exclude doctrinal teaching alone.	"we worked a lot on character building"	14	file:40,file:42
21	Membership Formation	Resilience through crisis	Membership cohesion and identity deepen through shared hardship, loss, or institutional adversity.	Include remaining through poverty, decline, dismantling pressure, or neighborhood crisis.	Exclude isolated personal problems.	"skeleton crews and diminished financial bases"	18	file:41,file:48
22	Membership Formation	Identity from margins	The congregation understands itself as called, valuable, and missional precisely from a marginalized social location.	Include language of the poor, abandoned, forgotten, least, or marginalized as theological identity.	Exclude simple demographic description.	"least of these... great glorification"	15	file:40,file:41

23	Membership Formation	Community restoration	Membership includes commitment to social, educational, and economic repair in the neighborhood.	Include community services, literacy, school, addiction recovery vision, and family strengthening.	Exclude internal church programs lacking community orientation.	"help the community recover economically"	20	file:40,file:41,file:48
24	Sustainability	Adaptive expansion	Ministry expands in response to lived need and opportunity rather than fixed master planning.	Include growth from 900 to 10,000 sq ft, new programs arising from need, or scaling organically.	Exclude prepackaged expansion strategies.	"900 to 10,000 sq ft"	14	file:43,file:44,file:40
25	Sustainability	Divine resourcing amid scarcity	Material sustainability is narrated as God’s provision in conditions of visible insufficiency.	Include exact amounts arriving, provision stories, and unexpected resourcing.	Exclude routine budgeting without theological interpretation.	"exact amount needed"	24	file:48,file:40,file:41
26	Sustainability	Faith over financial planning	Sustainability relies more on obedience and trust than on conventional fundraising or institutional capitalization.	Include absence of fundraisers, little grant knowledge, or moving without cash in hand.	Exclude standard budget management.	"we never had fundraisers"	19	file:40,file:48

27	Sustainability	Small donor ecology	Ministry is sustained by many modest contributions, tithes, offerings, and in-kind support rather than major capital donors.	Include donors, member giving, local business help, or in-kind support.	Exclude denominational subsidy.	"tithes... offerings... donors"	17	file:40,file:41,file:48
28	Sustainability	Theocentric identity	The church defines itself primarily in relation to God's mission rather than institutional status or market success.	Include language such as army of few, God-centered mission, restoration of whole person.	Exclude branding language detached from theology.	"army of few whose members move as one"	18	file:41,file:48
29	Sustainability	Provision as theological witness	Provision narratives function as testimony that interprets God's character and validates the ministry's calling.	Include testimony where provision proves God's faithfulness or confirms vocation.	Exclude mere gratitude for resources.	"Prayer first, provision followed"	16	file:48,file:40
30	Sustainability	Institutional friction and financial gatekeeping	External denominational or formal structures fail to recognize, resource, or protect marginalized congregatio	Include dismantling, surveillance, exclusion, or underfunding by denominational structures.	Exclude internal church challenges only.	"low socioeconomic status was invoked"	20	file:41,file:1

			ns adequately.					
31	Sustainability	Alternative viability	The congregation demonstrates durable ministry outside dominant affluent church-planting metrics.	Include thriving before institutional entry, effective ministry without wealth, or contextual measures of success.	Exclude claims of success without evidence.	"function effectively and sustainably"	18	file:1,file:41
32	Cross-cutting	Missional total-person restoration	Mission is framed holistically as spiritual, economic, educational, emotional, and social restoration.	Include total person, whole child, whole family, spirit and soul, literacy and employment alongside worship.	Exclude narrow evangelistic-only frames.	"restoration of the total person"	23	file:41,file:40,file:48

Theme frequency analysis table

The theme frequency analysis table summarizes the final thematic structure developed through iterative coding of the six interview transcripts. It provides a concise overview of how frequently each finalized theme appeared across the interview data and

indicates the breadth of recurrence of each theme across the six interviews included in the study. The table reflects the final twelve-theme framework used in Chapter 3 and in the appendices and serves both as a snapshot of thematic distribution and as a cross-check between the analytic discussion in Chapter 3 and the supporting transcript evidence presented in the appendices.

Theme Section	Core Theme	# Interviews (out of 6)	Raw Mentions	% Coverage
Origins & Founding	Spirit-led Discernment	6/6	28	100%
	Call to Community and Place	6/6	17	100%
	Women as Infrastructure	5/6	11	83%
Leadership Formation	Leadership Formation from Within	5/6	13	83%
Membership & Belonging	Children and Youth as the Core Pathway for Membership Formation	6/6	19	100%
	Holistic Restoration and Dignity Formation as	5/6	18	100%

	Pathways to Membership			
Sustainability	Resilience as Institutional Competency	6/6	18	100%
	Adaptive Ministries and Leadership under Constraint	6/6	18	100%
	Women as Infrastructure of Ministry Sustainability	6/6	22	100%
	Church–Community Mutuality as a Model of Congregational Sustainability	6/6	18	100%
	Institutional Friction and Financial Gatekeeping	6/6	18	100%
	Supernatural Guidance and Divine Resourcing as Operational Theology	6/6	24	100%
Overall	**12 Themes Total**	**6/6 interviews**	**222 total coded instances**	**Average 97% coverage**

Key Rigor Notes:

- **Data Source**: Derived from six semi-structured interviews with leaders from Deliverance Temple Church of God in Christ and Sound the Alarm Ministries, supplemented by contextual and documentary materials.
- **Coding Process:** Themes were developed through iterative coding that combined inductive coding of recurring interview patterns (emergent codes like "prayer vigils," "daycare transport") with deductive coding guided by the study's research questions and theological concerns (RQ-linked themes). Each interview averaged 20-25 coded segments.
- **Coverage:** The "# Interviews" column indicates the breadth of recurrence of each theme across the six interviews, while the "Raw Mentions" column reflects the number of coded supporting transcript excerpts retained for each finalized theme.

  Frequency Pattern: Several themes demonstrated full interview coverage across all six interviews, e.g., Children and Youth as the Core Pathway for Membership Formation, Resilience as Institutional Competency, Adaptive Ministries and Leadership under Constraint, Women as Infrastructure of Ministry Sustainability, etc. indicating structural saturation,
- **Validation:** The thematic structure was strengthened through repeated transcript review, comparison across both congregations, triangulation with contextual materials, and member-checking of the broader interpretive direction.
- **Methodological strength:** Themes appeared across both congregations independently. The recurrence of the 12 themes across both congregations, together with the consistency of supporting excerpts within multiple interview sources, strengthens the reliability of the thematic analysis and confirms pattern reliability.

- Master Themes Matrix

Table A. Master Theme Development Matrix

Domain	Theme	Representative raw data	Descriptive code	Analytic claim
Origins/Founding	1. Spirit-led discernment as the foundational framework for ministry formation	"As we prayed, the Lord led us to a small building here in Aliquippa…"	prayerful discernment	Ministry direction emerged through spiritual discernment rather than market logic
Origins/Founding	2. Call to community and place	"My ministry is in Aliquippa."	place-rooted call	Ministry identity was tied to place, not mobility
Origins/Founding	3. Women as infrastructure of ministry vision and foundation	women led prayer, discernment, and early program development	women's visionary labor	Women functioned as foundational infrastructure in ministry formation
Leadership	4. Leadership formation from within	"I probably have held every position possible in the local church."	internal leadership cultivation	Leaders emerged through participation, service, and trust
Membership	5. Children and youth as the core pathway for membership formation	camp, daycare, school, ROOTS, YES	youth-centered entry point	Families often entered congregational life through ministries serving children

Membership	6. Holistic restoration and dignity formation as pathways to membership	tutoring, reentry, parenting support, job preparation	dignity-restoring ministry	Membership often developed through restorative community engagement
Sustainability	7. Resilience as institutional competency	“We just kept working”; “stay the course”	resilient persistence	Resilience functioned as an organizational habit, not a one-time reaction
Sustainability	8. Adaptive ministries and leadership under constraint	programs shifted from camp to daycare to school to employment support to reentry	adaptive innovation	Ministries evolved in response to community need and constraint
Sustainability	9. Women as infrastructure of ministry sustainability	women administered, organized, and sustained programs	women’s sustaining labor	Women provided continuity and operational stability
Sustainability	10. Church–community mutuality as a model of congregational sustainability	churches built ministries around real neighborhood needs	community embeddedness	Sustainability was rooted in reciprocal community ties
Sustainability	11. Institutional friction & financial gatekeeping	pastoral salary expectations and outside evaluative standards	financial gatekeeping	Institutional metrics often misread marginalized ministries
Sustainability	12. Supernatural guidance and divine resourcing as operational theology	exact provision, timely donors, property access, faith before capital	providential resourcing	Divine provision was treated as an operative ministry logic

Table B. Evidence Matrix for Theme 1

Spirit-led discernment as the foundational framework for ministry formation

Participant/source	Data excerpt	Open code	Why it supports the theme
Sound the Alarm	"As we prayed, the Lord led us to a small building here in Aliquippa…"	prayer-guided site selection	Founding decisions are narrated as discernment-led
Sound the Alarm	leadership meets monthly with prayer before decisions	prayer as governance	Discernment is not devotional add-on but governance practice
Sound the Alarm	they described prayer vigils over future property	sustained collective discernment	Ministry expansion is preceded by spiritual waiting and prayer

Interpretation:
These excerpts demonstrate that discernment functioned as the congregation's practical decision-making framework, shaping where ministry began, how decisions were authorized, and how uncertainty was interpreted.

Table C. Evidence Matrix for Theme 2

Call to community and place

Participant/source	Data excerpt	Open code	Why it supports the theme
Sound the Alarm	"My husband is a son of Aliquippa…"	relational rootedness	Founding identity is tied to Aliquippa itself
Sound the Alarm	"The Lord was sending us here to Aliquippa."	divine call to place	Ministry is framed as geographically specific

Bishop Moreland	"My ministry is here… I realized that the ministry is here."	place-rooted vocation	Staying in Aliquippa is interpreted as vocational obedience
Bishop Moreland	he remained despite other opportunities	refusal of mobility	Long-term presence is not accidental but theological

Interpretation:
The data show that leaders did not describe ministry as a transferable professional assignment, but as a place-bound calling shaped by obedience, community attachment, and historical continuity.

Table D. Evidence Matrix for Theme 3

Women as infrastructure of ministry vision and foundation

Participant/source	Data excerpt	Open code	Why it supports the theme
Sound the Alarm	Pastor Vera narrates property vision, prayer, and early ministry imagination	women's visionary leadership	A woman's spiritual and practical imagination shaped ministry beginnings
Sound the Alarm	women organized prayer, camps, daycare, and early care structures	women's programmatic labor	Women provided early ministry architecture
Sound the Alarm	family and women-led discernment around education/daycare	women as discernment infrastructure	Founding vision moved into form through women's leadership

Analytic bridge:
The interview material shows that women were not merely participants in early ministry; they served as the spiritual, organizational, and relational infrastructure that made ministry formation possible.

Table E. Evidence Matrix for Theme 4

Leadership formation from within

Participant/source	Data excerpt	Open code	Why it supports the theme
Bishop Moreland	"I probably have held every position possible in the local church."	leadership through service	Leadership developed through embodied participation
Bishop Moreland	van driver, janitor, teacher, elder	role progression	Leadership emerged incrementally from within
Sound the Alarm	leaders were trained from among participants and members	internal cultivation	Congregations built leadership capacity from existing people
Sound the Alarm	people were empowered into responsibility rather than recruited externally	participatory formation	Trust and service preceded title

Analytic sentence:
These excerpts support the argument that leadership was formed organically through participation, responsibility, and relational trust rather than primarily through external recruitment or credentialed appointment.

Table F. Evidence Matrix for Theme 5

Children and youth as the core pathway for membership formation

Participant/source	Data excerpt	Open code	Why it supports the theme
Sound the Alarm	Mighty Warriors camp served children and drew in parents	youth-first outreach	Children's ministry functioned as congregational entry point

Sound the Alarm	daycare "opened the door for the parents to bring in their children"	family access through childcare	Ministries to children built family connection
Sound the Alarm	school, daycare, YES program	youth-centered ministry ecosystem	Youth programming structured membership formation
Deliverance Temple	ROOTS served youth pushed aside by schools/courts	youth intervention as belonging pathway	Youth-focused programs created ties to church and leaders

Analytic sentence:
The data indicate that membership formation often began not through formal invitation alone but through youth-serving ministries that created trust, visibility, and relational connection with families.

Table G. Evidence Matrix for Theme 6

Holistic restoration and dignity formation as pathways to membership

Participant/source	Data excerpt	Open code	Why it supports the theme
Sound the Alarm	literacy, budgeting, parenting, employment preparation	holistic support	People entered through ministries restoring agency
Deliverance Temple	ROOTS, reentry, rides, clothing, food, job support	restorative accompaniment	Church became a place of dignifying care
Deliverance Temple	"we still value them" even after mistakes	dignity-centered response	Belonging emerged through restoration rather than exclusion
Sound the Alarm	church concerned with "the total man"	whole-person ministry	Membership developed through comprehensive restoration

Analytic sentence:
These excerpts show that belonging was often built through ministries that restored dignity, stability, and hope in concrete life conditions rather than through narrow institutional membership practices.

Table H. Evidence Matrix for Theme 7

Resilience as institutional competency

Participant/source	Data excerpt	Open code	Why it supports the theme
Sound the Alarm	“Stay the course.”	persevering posture	Persistence is named as a ministry discipline
Sound the Alarm	“tithes and offerings took care of both places”	enduring under strain	The church sustained multiple burdens without quitting
Bishop Moreland	ministry repackaged after the steel decline	resilient reinterpretation	Crisis was met with adaptive persistence
Sound the Alarm	they considered quitting but continued	emotional durability	Resilience includes emotional and spiritual endurance

Analytic sentence:
The data support reading resilience not as an occasional response to crisis but as an embedded organizational competency that enabled ministry continuity amid chronic hardship.

Table I. Evidence Matrix for Theme 8

Adaptive ministries and leadership under constraint

Participant/source	Data excerpt	Open code	Why it supports the theme

Deliverance Temple	street meetings after industrial decline	ministry restructuring	Leaders changed form in response to context
Deliverance Temple	ROOTS shifted from afterschool to alternative school to reentry	adaptive expansion	Ministries evolved with changing needs
Sound the Alarm	from church to daycare to learning center to school to workforce preparation	layered adaptation	Programs were built around observed need
Sound the Alarm	ministries developed because “we needed to do more than feed and clothe”	responsive innovation	Need, not template, drove expansion

Analytic sentence:
These excerpts demonstrate that adaptive capacity was central to congregational sustainability, with leaders repeatedly revising ministry forms in response to concrete community realities.

Table J. Evidence Matrix for Theme 9

Women as infrastructure of ministry sustainability

Participant/source	Data excerpt	Open code	Why it supports the theme
Sound the Alarm	daughter and women trained into daycare and educational leadership	women sustaining operations	Women carried program continuity
Sound the Alarm	women initiated and managed relational care structures	sustaining labor	Women stabilized ministries over time
Deliverance Temple	women helped structure support systems around youth and families	women’s sustaining work	Women’s labor underwrote continuity

Analytic sentence:
The data suggests that women's labor was not only foundational in ministry formation but crucial to sustaining the daily organizational, relational, and spiritual life of the congregations.

Table K. Evidence Matrix for Theme 10

Church–community mutuality as a model of congregational sustainability

Participant/source	Data excerpt	Open code	Why it supports the theme
Deliverance Temple	"we were in the community, we understood the times… and we knew what to do"	embedded community knowledge	Sustainability flowed from local embeddedness
Sound the Alarm	daycare, camps, school, youth employment, parenting support	community-responsive ministries	Church and neighborhood were mutually linked
Deliverance Temple	church served as support system for rides, court, jail, food, childcare	reciprocal neighborhood care	Congregation functioned as community infrastructure
Sound the Alarm	ministries arose from homelessness, addiction, childcare, educational gaps	need-shaped mission	Church identity was formed through local relational exchange

Analytic sentence:
These data show that congregational sustainability was grounded less in institutional separation from the community than in deep mutual embeddedness within it.

Table L. Evidence Matrix for Theme 11

Institutional friction and financial gatekeeping

Participant/source	Data excerpt	Open code	Why it supports the theme
Bishop Moreland	poorer churches cannot always support full-time pastors	economic disparity in evaluation	Financial weakness does not equal ministerial failure
Bishop Moreland	pastors often maintain secular work while doing ministry	bivocational resilience	Institutional expectations can misread poor churches
dissertation framing	denominational salary and funding metrics created tension	gatekeeping logic	Financial metrics become legitimacy tests

Analytic sentence:
This evidence supports the theme that institutional judgments often privilege salary benchmarks and formal financial indicators in ways that obscure actual congregational vitality in marginalized settings.

Table M. Evidence Matrix for Theme 12

Supernatural guidance and divine resourcing as operational theology

Participant/source	Data excerpt	Open code	Why it supports the theme
Sound the Alarm	exact amount needed to secure the building was given at the needed moment	providential provision	Financial resourcing is interpreted theologically
Sound the Alarm	property released after years of prayer and later funded for cleanup	divine timing and resourcing	Expansion is narrated as guided and provided by God

Deliverance Temple	leaders initiated ministry trusting God would make a way	faith-before-capital logic	Ministry action preceded visible resources
Sound the Alarm	"God knowing what we needed provided it"	operational providence	Divine provision is a governing ministry assumption

Analytic sentence:
The data show that divine guidance and providential resourcing were not peripheral devotional ideas but part of the congregations' practical operating logic for risk, timing, and expansion.

Raw excerpt	First-cycle code	Second-cycle code	Final theme
"The Lord led us…"	prayer-led decision	discernment framework	Theme 1
"My ministry is here"	place commitment	vocational anchoring	Theme 2
women initiated prayer/programs	women's labor	women's infrastructural leadership	Themes 3 / 9
"held every position possible"	leadership through service	internal formation	Theme 4
camp/daycare/ROOTS/YES	youth-serving ministry	youth as entry pathway	Theme 5
tutoring/food/rides/reentry	restorative care	dignity formation	Theme 6
"stay the course"	perseverance	resilience competency	Theme 7
ministries kept changing with need	adaptive response	contextual innovation	Theme 8

church as neighborhood support system	community embeddedness	mutuality model	Theme 10
salary/financial expectations	institutional metric pressure	financial gatekeeping	Theme 11
exact provision after prayer	providential resourcing	operational theology	Theme 12

Appendix C

Appendix C-1. Spirit-Led Discernment as the Foundational Framework for Ministry Formation

	Excerpt	Spirit-led discernment subtheme/code
1.	"When He dealt with us starting the church, we started praying and asking God where?" -Sound the Alarm	Foundational discernment
2.	"Everything has to be endorsed by the Lord." -Sound the Alarm	Spiritual authorization
3.	"We do nothing without prayer." -Sound the Alarm	Prayer as governing principle
4.	"Our board holds prayer and meetings once a month. And together, we make decisions for the church." -Sound the Alarm	Prayer as governance practice
5.	"We sought the Lord and determined the name we would use for our evangelistic outreach would be Sound the Alarm Ministries." -Sound the Alarm	Prayerful identity discernment
6.	"As we prayed, the Lord led us to a small building here in Aliquippa, at the base of Linmar housing development." -Sound the Alarm	Prayer as site discernment
7.	"We began to just anoint the property for the community, not knowing that God would eventually end up giving us the property." -Sound the Alarm	Prayer as site discernment
8.	"God led us to that very building and said 'start the ministry there.'" -Sound the Alarm	Divine instruction confirmed through prayer
9.	"At this time, we were doing a lot of prayer throughout the community — at different locations in the community." -Sound the Alarm	Public prayer as ministry practice

10. “It was there on Kennedy Boulevard that we began to have prayer vigils throughout the community.” -Sound the Alarm	Public prayer as ministry practice
11. “God led us to that very building and said ‘start the ministry there.’” -Sound the Alarm	Divine instruction confirmed through prayer
12. “They were in prayer and the Lord spoke to them and said, ‘Release this property into the hands of Sound the Alarm Ministries.’” -Sound the Alarm	Prayer as divine confirmation
13. “The Lord had laid it on my heart … He laid her on my heart to intercede for her…I opened the service back up recognizing that this was a divine connection that God was making.” -Sound the Alarm	Intercessory discernment and discernment of divine connection
14. “We began to pray for the property that God would give vision for the use of that property.” -Sound the Alarm	Prayer over community sites
15. “We believe that God anointed us for the time that we were living in, to meet the needs that impacted our community, the families and our local ministries here.” -Deliverance Temple	Discernment of ministry vocation as divine arrangement
16. “All the steps were ordered by the Lord.” -Deliverance Temple	Discernment of community engagement
17. “We were in the community, we understood the times we were living in and we knew what to do.” -Deliverance Temple	Community-embedded discernment as divine guidance
18. “God gave us an understanding of the times that we were living in, the nature of the community, the climate of the community, the potential demise of the community, the challenges of the community.” -Deliverance Temple	Discernment as reading the times/context
19. “So, being that she was sitting with them, the LORD gave her a brilliant idea: she started this group called ‘The Village Keepers.’” -Deliverance Temple	Community-embedded discernment as divine guidance
20. “The local church in the community was in place because we were connected to the community. We understood the times we lived in.” -Deliverance Temple	Discernment as reading the times/context

21. "What would have happened if you would not have been here to help someone get out of a bad situation? What would have happened if you would not have been here when that young man was getting ready to die, and you came in and you prayed him into the Kingdom? What would have happened?" - Deliverance Temple	Community-embedded discernment as divine guidance
22. "God put me here. God reached around a lot of people to allow for me to be here. He walked past a lot of people to allow for me to be here. He moved a lot of people out of the way for me to be here, even people that said I wouldn't be here. Some people that had no hope said "he's not going to make it there! He's not from the right family. He's from that Moreland clan. They're not going to be effective in the community" - Deliverance Temple	Discernment of ministry vocation as divine arrangement
23. "So, it impacted us. Therefore, we saw that need in that generation, that was going that road." -Deliverance Temple	Discernment as reading the times/context
24. "...so within that district, that district superintendent will identify someone in that district and make his recommendation to myself and the committee for this individual to be installed or considered pastor. Then, we'll do the investigative work, background, where he's at spiritually. You know, spiritually, we'll vet him" -Deliverance Temple	Discernment of leadership from within
25. "And then you have to rally yourself around the right people. You have to surround yourself with an army of people that have the same kind of mindset. You surround yourself with somebody who's going to be in the trenches with you; that's going to have your back; that's going to encourage you when you get discouraged. We got to have that in place because you're not always encouraged." -Deliverance Temple	Discernment of spiritual partners
26. "I believe that God allowed us to go through those challenges so that we can realize that if we put things in His hands, let Him take control of it; take our hands off the wheel, let Him work it out, and He opened doors where there were no doors. He gave us favor with people that don't know why he gave us favor. The community is still scratching their heads, like "how did you all get that building out there?" They just don't understand it." -Deliverance Temple	Discernment of challenges as opportunities for divine intervention
27. "So God has allowed us to know that there are going to be challenges, disappointments and setbacks, but we just keep fighting through it." -Deliverance Temple	Discernment of ministry challenges

28. "That's when it's the job, it's the responsibility of that local church to assure his people of who they are and what they've been called to do, what their assignment is. I always tell my ministry here, I say "I am not overly concerned with any other ministry down the street or around the corner. My responsibility is my assignment here. They do what they do, I don't knock it, I don't complain about it, that's what they do. My responsibility…And once you instill that kind of spirit in the people, then, they'll work hard and they'll embrace what little they have and they'll take pride in what they have." - Deliverance Temple	Discernment of community's ministries' vocations

Summary of transcript excerpts supporting theme of spirit-led discernment:

- Foundational discernment, spiritual authorization, and prayerful identity formation: 1, 2, 3, 5
- Prayer as governance, site discernment, and divine confirmation: 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 14
- Public prayer and community-facing discernment practices: 9, 10, 13
- Discernment of ministry vocation, community engagement, and reading the times: 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23
- Discernment of leadership, spiritual partners, and ministry challenges: 24, 25, 26, 27, 28

Appendix C-2. Call to Community and Place

	Excerpt	Call to community and place subtheme/code
1.	"My husband is a son of Aliquippa, and the Lord directed us as we attended churches in the area, and then he began to lead us to establish, to plant a church and so it was here in Aliquippa 1989." – Sound the Alarm	Call to Aliquippa as place
2.	"We were also in 1989, sent by another ministry to establish a church in Zelienople but we really didn't feel the call for us was to Zelienople … but the Lord was sending us here to Aliquippa." – Sound the Alarm	Call to Aliquippa over alternative location
3.	"We ministered under him for a period of time at his church and then the Lord called us to establish our ministry here in Aliquippa." – Sound the Alarm	Place-specific ministry call
4.	"One of our questions to the Lord was why would you send us here? Why Aliquippa?" – Sound the Alarm	Theological questioning of place-call
5.	"His answer to us is 'in deprived areas and in areas where the people are disqualified or cast aside, my glory shines the greatest.'" – Sound the Alarm	Divine rationale for marginalized place
6.	"I was led back to the building on Kennedy Boulevard, and there we started our first church." – Sound the Alarm	Return to a specific place of assignment
7.	"The Spirit of Lord would stop us because we just knew we couldn't possibly be in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania." – Sound the Alarm	Divine restraint from leaving place
8.	"There was a border; you couldn't cross it. We couldn't cross it. In the spiritual realm we were unable to crossover … that's God saying to us, this is where I want you." – Sound the Alarm	Spiritual boundary around place-calling

9. "It was here at this building that the vision we carried in our hearts began further to materialize. Our mission call was to plant a church in Aliquippa area, a depraved, economically stricken area to deposit and rebuild hope in a region where hopes were shattered." – Sound the Alarm	Mission tied to a specific wounded place
10. "I am a native born son of Aliquippa, born and raised here." – Deliverance Temple	Native rootedness in place
11. "I really never relocated out of Aliquippa. I just relocated to school." – Deliverance Temple	Continued attachment to place
12. "I still had a strong connection to stay in this area." – Deliverance Temple	Relationally anchored place-commitment
13. "That's really what caused me to remain in the area, the family connection." – Deliverance Temple	Family-rooted place commitment
14. "Being that we were married, that really put the nail on the coffin that this is where I am supposed to be." – Deliverance Temple	Relational confirmation of place
15. "We had opportunities, we did … However, I understood that my ministry was here." – Deliverance Temple	Staying despite alternative opportunities
16. "Even now, I'm the bishop over 35 churches in Western Pennsylvania … but my ministry is in Aliquippa." – Deliverance Temple	Place-rooted vocation over upward mobility
17. "I've asked God that question before, 'LORD, why am I still here?' … but then you also look back and see what you accomplished right here." – Deliverance Temple	Endurance in place through reflective calling

Summary of transcript excerpts supporting theme of call to community and place:

- Call to Aliquippa as a divinely assigned place: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9
- Divine restraint and redirection into place-based vocation: 7, 8
- Rootedness through family, history, and long-term presence: 10, 11, 12, 13, 14
- Staying despite alternative opportunities: 15, 16, 17
- Commitment to community as responsibility and vocation: 17

Appendix C-3: Women as Infrastructure of Vision and Mission Transcript Excerpts

	Excerpt	Women as infrastructure of vision and mission subtheme/code
1.	"That very same building I had prayed for years earlier under my former pastor David Armstead." – Sound the Alarm	Women's visionary prayer preceding ministry formation
2.	"My pastor asked that we go down and I pray for the building." – Sound the Alarm	Women's spiritual discernment over ministry space
3.	"We began to pray for the property that God would give vision for the use of that property." – Sound the Alarm	Women's visionary discernment for community transformation
4.	"I had met one woman, the mother, but never knew her name, and the Lord had laid it on my heart … He laid her on my heart to intercede for her." – Sound the Alarm	Intercessory and spiritually discerning maternal leadership
5.	"I opened the service back up recognizing that this was a divine connection that God was making." – Sound the Alarm	Women's discernment of relational mission openings
6.	"Our oldest daughter had worked with Easter Seal Society … she came with a vision of well — 'Mom, Dad, how can I help start this daycare?' So she helped with that." – Sound the Alarm	Women initiating and shaping programmatic ministry
7.	"But I still had a strong connection to stay in this area. My family was here, my mother was here. She needed help, she was a single parent and me being one of the oldest kids, i felt the need to be around to help take care of her, so to speak. So, that's what happened, that's what got us here." -Deliverance Temple	Maternal relational authority shaping pastoral mission response
8.	"And then in the process of all of that, remaining here, being connected with my mother and my family, I kind of ran into this young lady, that kind of caught my eyes a little bit, and one thing led to another and we ended up getting married. And being that we were married, that really put the nail on the	Women relational authority shaping pastoral mission response

	coffin that this is where I am supposed to be." -Deliverance Temple	
9.	"She had a background in criminal justice and she was a probation officer for the community, and they allowed her to start a pilot program." – Deliverance Temple	Women initiating mission-responsive community intervention
10.	"Being that she was sitting with them, the LORD gave her a brilliant idea: she started this group called 'The Village Keepers.'" – Deliverance Temple	Women generating ministry vision from within community need
11.	"You would see a mother come to church, her heart's heavy because her son's on drugs, her son's in jail… You know how many times I had to go to the jail, maybe with a mother or for a mother? Go to court?" – Deliverance Temple	Maternal relational authority shaping pastoral mission response

Summary of transcript excerpts supporting theme of women as infrastructure of vision and mission:

- Women's visionary prayer and spiritual discernment in ministry formation: 1, 2, 3
- Intercessory and spiritually discerning maternal leadership: 4, 5
- Women initiating and shaping programmatic ministry: 6, 9, 10
- Maternal and women-centered relational authority shaping pastoral mission response: 7, 8, 11

Appendix C-4. Leadership Formation from Within

	Excerpt	Leadership formation from within subtheme/code
1.	"I probably have held every position possible in the local church." -Deliverance Temple	Leadership through gradual internal formation
2.	"I was the van driver; I was the janitor; I taught Sunday School; I was one of the Associate Minister Elders." -Deliverance Temple	Leadership through service and practical labor
3.	"Whatever your hands can do, you do it. Nothing is above you, nothing is beneath you. You see the need and you begin to minister to the need." -Deliverance Temple	Leadership formed through responsive service
4.	"For 5 years after he had been afflicted with a stroke, I had to step in and make sure the ministry was healthy and he was still alive. He was still coming to church in that condition. I still always honored him as the pastor of the ministry." -Deliverance Temple	Leadership formed in transition and continuity
5.	"Because we had a system in place, where the ministry leaders were going to carry the ministry…" -Deliverance Temple	Leadership sustained by internal ministry structure
6.	"We began to train them in soul-winning. We began to impart some of the vision to that family. That family is still a part of our ministry today." -Sound the Alarm	Leadership formation through discipleship and vision transfer
7.	"God began to deposit in their hearts, vision for the community as well. They were following the vision that we had begun to impart to them and their hearts connecting to it. Few but united. Few people, but very united in purpose." -Sound the Alarm	Leadership formation through shared vision

8. "Even when we got in the building, we were praying for leadership, for people to become parts of the leadership and God would send them. He would send them … and He would say who to put in position and we would do it." -Sound the Alarm	Leadership identification from within the congregation
9. "Our oldest daughter had worked with Easter Seal Society … she came with a vision of well — 'Mom, Dad, how can I help start this daycare?' So she helped with that." -Sound the Alarm	Family-based emergence into leadership responsibility
10. "So we called on her to help come and train — so we're empowering — to train some of the women and some of the men in our congregation in Montessori. So we can implement the program." -Sound the Alarm	Internal training and skill-based leadership development
11. "We had the people who were with us all come and join in and to work in the church to get it finished, and make it their own." -Sound the Alarm	Leadership formation through shared labor and ownership
12. "She had a background in criminal justice and she was a probation officer for the community, and they allowed her to start a pilot program." -Deliverance Temple	Grassroots leadership emerging from community competence
13. "Out of that program, The Village Keepers' program, that's where the R.O.O.T.S came into existence." -Deliverance Temple	Leadership expanding from internal initiative into ministry structure

Summary of transcript excerpts supporting theme of leadership formation from within:

- Leadership through gradual internal formation, service, and practical labor: 1, 2, 3
- Leadership formed in transition, continuity, and internal ministry structure: 4, 5
- Leadership formation through discipleship, shared vision, and congregational recognition: 6, 7, 8
- Leadership emergence through family participation, internal training, and shared labor: 9, 10, 11
- Grassroots leadership emerging from community competence and internal initiative: 12, 13

Appendix C-5. Children and Youth as the Core Pathway for Membership Formation

	Excerpt	Children and youth membership pathway subtheme/code
1.	"It was at that location the ministry began a week of camp each year. We called it Mighty Warriors, serving children 5 to 17 years of age in the Aliquippa community." – Sound the Alarm	Children's and youth exposure programs
2.	"Camp alone have serviced over 1000 of the Greater Aliquippa kids and the community, and we continue to serve even until now." – Sound the Alarm	Children's and youth exposure programs
3.	"The children's ministry that was started there, I guess it was one of the first things, was the children. The children's ministry. And we still have camp until this day." – Sound the Alarm	Children's and youth exposure programs
4.	"We set up our daycare in 1996 … not just to raise money or for finance but to offer service to moms who were returning to the workforce, single moms." – Sound the Alarm	Family access through childcare
5.	"As of today, we have serviced over 3000 children in daycare services." – Sound the Alarm	Family access through childcare
6.	"The daycare wasn't created just to raise money or to have monies, but to help moms and to help those in the community and their kids will be in a safe environment." – Sound the Alarm	Family access through childcare
7.	"We developed what we call the Hope Christian Center but one of the very first programs started there on Franklin Avenue was In His Hands Daycare Center in 1995." – Sound the Alarm	Youth-centered ministry ecosystem
8.	"Seeing the deficiency of the children in the area academically, Sound the Alarm Ministry in 1997 developed the Early Childhood Learning Center." – Sound the Alarm	Youth-centered ministry ecosystem
9.	"The school called us and asked … 'we heard that you have a vision for a Christian School; how can we help?,' which pulled us out and began to give feet to our vision." – Sound the Alarm	Educational response for children and families

10. "The YES Program … we had a vision because we were getting teenagers and teenagers were coming to this church and we were going into the community gathering teenagers." – Sound the Alarm	Teen outreach as congregational entry pathway
11. "Some needed a babysitter, just a babysitter. 'I got to go take care of this business. Can you keep my kids while I'm gone.' Or 'Can you run down to Sister So-and-so and ask them if she can help me with this?' Or 'Can she drive my kids…?'" - Deliverance Temple	Family support and children's care
12. "Even some of our parishioners here, some of their children were going wayward, grandchildren that were going wayward… So, it affected and impacted us directly." -Deliverance Temple	Family support and children's care
13. "It was like an in-school, after-school program for those that were on probation." -Deliverance Temple	Teen outreach as congregational entry pathway
14. "She was able to tap into other resources that would come in and talk to them… Mentorship, just various programs that would allow these young men and young women [to be] in a place where they did not have to resort to that way of life." - Deliverance Temple	Youth formation through opportunity and belonging
15. "We saw that need in that generation, that was going that road. We had one sister here, Selena…She started this group called 'The Village Keepers.'" – Deliverance Temple	Justice-involved youth intervention as belonging pathway
16. "Out of that program, The Village Keepers' program, that's where the ROOTS came into existence … we would assist those young men with the afterschool activities, the work… Then of course, life skills." – Deliverance Temple	Justice-involved youth intervention as belonging pathway
17. "ROOTS was the organization that we founded through Deliverance Temple, and the ROOTS program started right here where we're sitting at, right in the basement of the church." - Deliverance Temple	Youth development through structured accompaniment
18. "A couple of nights a week, we would be down here… we would assist those young men… with the afterschool activities… Then of course, life skills." – Deliverance Temple	Alternative educational belonging pathway

19. "Because of the need of our young folks that were destined, pushed to the side… the community, we had to take some kind of responsibility to at least offer these young folks a better way of life."– Deliverance Temple

Teen outreach as congregational entry pathway

Summary of transcript excerpts supporting theme of children and youth as the core pathway for membership formation:

- Children's and youth exposure programs: 1, 2, 3
- Family access and congregational connection through childcare and family support: 4, 5, 6, 11, 12
- Youth-centered ministry ecosystem and educational response for children and families: 7, 8, 9
- Teen outreach and youth formation through opportunity, mentorship, and belonging: 10, 13, 14
- Justice-involved youth intervention and alternative belonging pathways: 15, 16, 17, 18, 19

Appendix C-6. Holistic Restoration and Dignity Formation as Pathways to Membership

	Excerpt	Holistic restoration and dignity formation subtheme/code
1.	"Our goal and mission was to restore the total person. Christ at the center, addressing spirit, soul, body, and social condition." – Sound the Alarm	Whole-person, Christ-centered restoration
2.	"We also started what we call the Hope Christian Center in that building, which was a social service program, Christ-centered with Christ at the center." – Sound the Alarm	Whole-person, Christ-centered restoration
3.	"At social service programs, we taught literacy, we taught budgeting — how to set up budget; you know, taking control programs…" -Sound the Alarm	Educational, parental, and economic empowerment
4.	"We knew young moms who were mostly single mothers that needed to be taught in nurturing. So our programs began to expand." -Sound the Alarm	Educational, parental, and economic empowerment
5.	"So we developed a program for nurturing young moms and young fathers in taking care of their kids." -Sound the Alarm	Educational, parental, and economic empowerment
6.	"We also engaged the parents and had seminars for the parents … partnering with the parents in the molding of the children." -Sound the Alarm	Educational, parental, and economic empowerment
7.	"The Y.E.S program — Youth Empowered to Succeed — where we matched teenagers with career aims and then went out and found placements for them throughout the county that would compensate them." -Sound the Alarm	Educational, parental, and economic empowerment
8.	"Some came to us that were homeless and needed a place to stay… So we knew we needed to do more than feed and clothe, so I began to look for housing for these young mothers." -Sound the Alarm	Material and relational stabilization

9. "The church was really a support system during these times because I've seen times when different members had needs in their lives." -Deliverance Temple	Material and relational stabilization
10. "God always had someone within the ministry and the circle and the family that had resources and means." – Deliverance Temple	Material and relational stabilization
11. "Allow them to see who they really are. Allow them to know that I am not what I am because of my current situation." -Deliverance Temple	Restoration of dignity and self-worth
12. "We saw that need in that generation… The Village Keepers… It was like an in-school, after-school program for those that were on probation. They were able to get the help that they needed." -Deliverance Temple	Restorative intervention for vulnerable and justice-involved persons
13. "We would assist those young men with the afterschool activities, the work… Then of course, life skills." -Deliverance Temple	Restorative intervention for vulnerable and justice-involved persons
14. "We always wanted those individuals to know in spite of the mistakes that they made, we still value them." -Deliverance Temple	Restoration of dignity and self-worth
15. "We would assist individuals coming out of incarceration to kind of reduce recidivism… to see what the needs are to be reintegrated into the communities and to be connected with the families." -Deliverance Temple	Restorative intervention for vulnerable and justice-involved persons

Summary of transcript excerpts supporting theme of holistic restoration and dignity formation as pathways to membership:

- Whole-person, Christ-centered restoration: 1, 2
- Educational, parental, and economic empowerment: 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
- Material and relational stabilization: 8, 9, 10
- Restoration of dignity and self-worth: 11, 14
- Restorative intervention for vulnerable and justice-involved persons: 12, 13, 15

Appendix C-7:Resilience as Institutional Competency

	Excerpt	Resilience as institutional competency subtheme/code
1.	"We are a people united and we have put our shoulders to the plow, and even now we have not looked back. Period." – Sound the Alarm	Persistent ministry continuity under disruption
2.	"If God would have told me it's gonna take that amount of time, I ain't gonna do it. I wouldn't have done it… but I had to labor. I had to labor and I had to physically do the work." – Sound the Alarm	Persistent ministry continuity under disruption
3.	"That really set us back… the finances that we had couldn't do what needed to be done because everything just went haywire. So we had to wait until God provided more finances and as He provided, we continued. The work never ceased. It never ceased." – Sound the Alarm	Persistent ministry continuity under disruption
4.	"Even through the pandemic, we didn't stop." – Sound the Alarm	Persistent ministry continuity under disruption
5.	"We had a flood and flushed us out… we had nowhere, nowhere to go." – Sound the Alarm	Persistent ministry continuity under disruption
6.	"We went back to our house where we started. We went back to our house and we started having services on our front lawn." – Sound the Alarm	Persistent ministry continuity under disruption
7.	"During the pandemic, we had to keep having church. We had nowhere to go, no building, and we knew God was saying keep having services." – Sound the Alarm	Persistent ministry continuity under disruption

8.	"The majority of them are still with us, except ones who have moved out of town or moved away. And that's how we started and how we navigated change in our building and surrounding us." – Sound the Alarm	Persistent ministry continuity under disruption
9.	"Whenever the steel mill shut down, a lot of their families not only just left the church but they left the area, and they moved away." – Deliverance Temple	Institutional endurance after economic loss
10.	"That kind of caused a skeleton crew to remain and it had a great impact on the local churches not just only here but also all the local churches in town." – Deliverance Temple	Institutional endurance after economic loss
11.	"So, we kind of had to repackage ministry so to speak." – Deliverance Temple	Institutional endurance after economic loss
12.	"We had to become very, very creative. We had to be strong in outreach, outreach ministries… we had to be very, very intentional in ministry outside the four walls." – Deliverance Temple	Institutional endurance after economic loss
13.	"The church was really a support system during these times… I've seen times when different members had needs in their lives." - Deliverance Temple	Support-system resilience as congregational capacity
14.	"The support system kicked in for those that were less fortunate, for God always had someone within the ministry and the circle and the family that had resources and means." -Deliverance Temple	Support-system resilience as congregational capacity
15.	"We had never ever considered… closing our doors. No matter how challenging it became, that was never on the radar, on the horizon." -Deliverance Temple	Norm of non-closure and forward movement
16.	"An obstacle is just a temporary setback. An obstacle don't mean stop." -Deliverance Temple	Norm of non-closure and forward movement
17.	"You have to surround yourself with an army of people that have the same kind of mindset… somebody that's going to be in the trenches with you, that's going to have your back, that's going to encourage you when you get discouraged." -Deliverance Temple	Support-system resilience as congregational capacity

18. "That's why we keep on doing what we're doing, because we don't know whose life we're gonna save. Whose family we're gonna help… That's why we keep the doors open." -Deliverance Temple	Norm of non-closure and forward movement

- **Summary of transcript excerpts supporting theme of resilience as institutional competency:**
- Persistent ministry continuity under disruption: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
- Institutional endurance after economic loss: 9, 10, 11, 12
- Support-system resilience as congregational capacity: 13, 14, 17
- Norm of non-closure and forward movement: 15, 16, 18

Appendix C-8. Adaptive Ministries and Leadership under Constraint

	Excerpt	Adaptive ministries and leadership under constraint subtheme/code
1.	"We set up our daycare in 1996… not just to raise money or for finance but to offer service to moms who were returning to the workforce, single moms." -Sound the Alarm	Adaptive family and social-service programming
2.	"We also started what we call the Hope Christian Center in that building, which was a social service program, Christ-centered with Christ at the center." -Sound the Alarm	Adaptive family and social-service programming
3.	"At social service programs, we taught literacy, we taught budgeting — how to set up budget; you know, taking control programs…" -Sound the Alarm	Adaptive family and social-service programming
4.	"We knew young moms who were mostly single mothers that needed to be taught in nurturing. So our programs began to expand." -Sound the Alarm	Adaptive family and social-service programming
5.	"So we developed a program for nurturing young moms and young fathers in taking care of their kids." -Sound the Alarm	Adaptive family and social-service programming
6.	"The Y.E.S program — Youth Empowered to Succeed — where we matched teenagers with career aims and then went out and found placements for them throughout the county that would compensate them." -Sound the Alarm	Adaptive educational and youth opportunity responses
7.	"At that location, a Christian school in the area was closing… the school called us and asked… 'we heard that you have a vision for a Christian School; how can we help?'" -Sound the Alarm	Adaptive educational and youth opportunity responses
8.	"So we began to take in children from the community." -Sound the Alarm	Adaptive educational and youth opportunity responses

9. "But whenever the steel mill shut down… we kind of had to repackage ministry so to speak." -Deliverance Temple	Adaptive outreach restructuring after economic decline
10. "We had to become very, very creative. We had to be strong in outreach, outreach ministries… we had to be very, very intentional in ministry outside the four walls." -Deliverance Temple	Adaptive outreach restructuring after economic decline
11. "What we did was, we kind of went around the city of Aliquippa in the different neighborhoods… 'Street Meetings' where we just take church out of the building and we would set up in different areas in the communities." -Deliverance Temple	Adaptive outreach restructuring after economic decline
12. "She had a background in criminal justice and she was a probation officer for the community, and they allowed her to start a pilot program." -Deliverance Temple	Adaptive justice-involved youth intervention
13. "The county allowed her to put that program together and staff it. It was like an in-school, after-school program for those that were on probation." -Deliverance Temple	Adaptive justice-involved youth intervention
14. "Out of that program, The Village Keepers' program, that's where the R.O.O.T.S came into existence." -Deliverance Temple	Adaptive justice-involved youth intervention
15. "It went from being an afterschool program… to ROOTS Academy, ROOTS Incorporated… and it was an alternative school for the students that just couldn't seem to meet the challenges of traditional school." -*Deliverance Temple*	Adaptive justice-involved youth intervention
16. "We transitioned from alternative education probably about 2016–17 and then became a part of the re-entry program." -Deliverance Temple	Adaptive re-entry and reintegration ministry
17. "We would assist individuals coming out of incarceration to kind of reduce recidivism and we were tied in with the county with that." -Deliverance Temple	Adaptive re-entry and reintegration ministry
18. "We were in the community, we understood the times we were living in and we knew what to do." -Deliverance Temple	Context-reading as adaptive leadership logic

Summary of transcript excerpts supporting theme of adaptive ministries and leadership under constraint:

- Adaptive family and social-service programming: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
- Adaptive educational and youth opportunity responses: 6, 7, 8
- Adaptive outreach restructuring after economic decline: 9, 10, 11
- Adaptive justice-involved youth intervention: 12, 13, 14, 15
- Adaptive re-entry and reintegration ministry: 16, 17
- Context-reading as adaptive leadership logic: 18

Appendix C-9: Women as Infrastructure of Ministry Sustainability

	Excerpt	Women as infrastructure of ministry sustainability subtheme/code
1.	"I (Pastor Vera Shymoniak) had met one woman, the mother, but never knew her name, and the Lord had laid it on my heart… so He laid her on my heart to intercede for her…I opened the service back up recognizing that this was a divine connection that God was making…We began to pray, we began to train them in soul-winning. We began to impart some of the vision to that family. That family is still a part of our ministry today." -Sound the Alarm	Women sustaining ministry through intercessory discernment and relational-spiritual activation
2.	We were looking to expand, not knowing that this very family (of woman prayed for in excerpt #1) owned the property that we had anointed and prayed concerning and they are not knowing. They were not knowing what we had also done. That we had also anointed this property not knowing who owned the property. So some years later and at this point they still didn't know, they were in prayer and the Lord spoke to them and said, "release this property into the hands of Sound the Alarm Ministries." and we acquired this property much later." -Sound the Alarm	Women sustaining ministry through prayer-linked property release and expansion
3.	"We knew young moms who were mostly single mothers that needed to be taught in nurturing. So our programs began to expand." -Sound the Alarm	Women sustaining ministry growth through maternal and parental formation
4.	"We set up daycare in 1996, and now still known as the lowest, lowest cost daycare center in the area and we intended, it was not just raising monies or for finance, but it was also to offer service to moms who was returning into the workforce of single moms. So as of today we have serviced over 3000 children in daycare services." -Sound the Alarm	Women and maternal needs programming sustaining ministry growth and legacy
5.	"The second place where we established our church and then.In downtown Aliquippa, so to speak.Which was a red light district.So in front of the building that I went to inquire about looking for an apartment was all type of prostitution and drug trafficking.So I talked to the owners of the building.For a housing for young women.And ask at that time, not knowing who owned the homes, who owned the building there. And they, they, they told me that they did have some property. Excuse me, they had some property, but also.Why was I	Women-centered need response opening pathways for ministry expansion

	interested in the building there? And I said it's a good place for a community services that we can offer.We would offer if we had that particular building, we would offer.Social service program.For the community and they said what else would you do? A daycare Center for needs and a low income for low income families. And so they said, well, why don't you take a look at the building?So we did find housing for the young mom, but they asked us to look at the building, so they gave us that property there to use to reach the community. So there we established our church." -Sound the Alarm	
6.	So we did find housing for the young mom, but they asked us to look at the building, so they gave us that property there to use to reach the community. So there we established our church.Our daycare services and the vision for our school, our school started there on that particular property there on Franklin Avenue which was now 10,000 square feet of space.So we went from 900 square feet of space.to 10,000 square feet of space. -Sound the Alarm	Women-centered initiatives paving the way for program expansion and property acquisition
7.	"The daycare wasn't created just to raise money or to have monies, but to help moms and to help those in the community and their kids will be in a safe environment." -Sound the Alarm	Women carrying maternal/community-responsive program vision
8.	"Our oldest daughter had worked with Easter Seal Society, so we had a heart, and someone with a heart to help children with learning disabilities in our community." -Sound the Alarm	Women carrying educational vision and developmental-care infrastructure
9.	"Tamu… was working out of Pittsburgh and had a really good job. And then God deals with her — because her heart had become attached to the vision — to quit her job and come and work for the ministry. We had no money to pay Tamu. She had a young baby. She was a single mom… We told her, you know, we don't have the finances to pay you. And she said God told me to come. … Soon as she came, God made the provision. She never was without a paycheck… enough to sustain her family. And as we increased, she also increased." -Sound the Alarm	Women carrying ministry sustainability through sacrificial vocational commitment

10. “The daycare wasn’t created just to raise money or to have monies, but to help moms and to help those in the community and their kids will be in a safe environment.” -Sound the Alarm	Women carrying maternal/community-responsive program vision
11. “So we begin to adopt and train and empower our teachers, those who maybe not had a degree, but moms who had maybe a high school diploma and train them in Montessori, because we was listed as a home school, at home school. OK, we decided to go to the state and establish our school in the state of Pennsylvania as the Hope Christian Academy.” -Sound the Alarm	Women leading training and empowerment that sustain educational ministry infrastructure
12. “Our oldest daughter had worked with Easter Seal Society, so we had a heart, and someone with a heart to help children with learning disabilities in our community.” -Sound the Alarm	Women carrying educational vision and developmental-care infrastructure
13. “My (Bishop Moreland) family was here, my mother was here. She needed help, she was a single parent and me being one of the oldest kids, i felt the need to be around to help take care of her, so to speak. So, that’s what happened, that’s what got us here.” -Deliverance Temple	Women-centered family obligation anchoring ministry presence
14. “And then in the process of all of that, remaining here, being connected with my mother and my family, I kind of ran into this young lady, that kind of caught my eyes a little bit, and one thing led to another and we ended up getting married. And being that we were married, that really put the nail on the coffin that this is where I am supposed to be. That’s really what caused me to remain in the area, the family connection” -Sound the Alarm	Women-centered relational anchoring and family formation sustaining presence
15. “The church was really a support system during these times because I’ve seen times when different members had needs in their lives. Some needed a babysitter, just a babysitter. “I got to go take care of this business. Can you keep my kids while I’m gone.” Or “Can you run down to Sister So-and-so and ask them if she can help me with this?” Or “Can she drive my kids…?.” -Deliverance Temple	Women-centered care networks sustaining congregational relevance
16. “Because even some of our parishioners here, some of their children were going wayward, grandchildren that were going wayward…So, it affected and impacted us directly…You would see a mother come to church, her heart’s heavy because her son’s on drugs, her son’s in jail…That impacted the local ministry. You know how many times i	Maternal burdens shaping ministry

had to go to the jail, maybe with a mother or for a mother? Go to court? So, it impacted us. Therefore, we saw that need in that generation, that was going that road." -Sound the Alarm	relevance and response
17. "We had one sister here, Selena. She had a background in criminal justice and she was a probation officer for the community, and they allowed her to start a pilot program. Since 90% of her clients were from Aliquippa School District, they allowed her to station her office right in the school. It was a first. Her office was right in the school." -Deliverance Temple	Women initiating community-sustaining interventions
18. "So, being that she was sitting with them, the LORD gave her a brilliant idea: she started this group called "The Village Keepers." And the county got behind it and expanded it to the county. The county allowed her to put that program together and staff it. It was like an in-school, after-school program for those that were on probation. They were able to get them the help that they needed. They were able to, she was able to tap into other resources that would come in and talk to them." -Deliverance Temple	Women initiating and structuring community-sustaining interventions
19. "So that program was very successful. Out of that program, The Village Keepers' program, that's where the R.O.O.T.S came into existence. ROOTS was the organization that we founded through Deliverance Temple, and the ROOTS program started right here where we're sitting at, right in the basement of the church.." -Deliverance Temple	Women-initiated programming sustaining ministry
20. "We outgrew here, we outgrew this. Then we moved to the community, to the building on Kennedy Boulevard. The ROOTS program was down there and it was successful out there and then an opportunity came up for us to purchase a building on Franklin Avenue, which is right in the heart of Aliquippa (that's where we met, when we were on Franklin Avenue). So at the ROOTS program, by now it's an alternative school. It went from being an afterschool program, the Village Keepers, the Afterschool program to ROOTS Academy, ROOTS Incorporated.." -Deliverance Temple	Women-initiated programming leading to ministry growth
21. " Of course, ROOTS stands for Reaching Over Obstacles To Succeed. That was the acronym and it was an alternative school for the students that just couldn't seem to meet the challenges of traditional school. So we did that program for about 20-25 years." -Deliverance Temple	Women-initiated programming sustaining ministry
22. "We also had kids come in from other school districts because of the program, because of the structure of the program and the success of the program. Being tied in to the juvenile probation of Beaver County, some were referred to us, court-ordered. Some even court-ordered to be a part of our program. So, we were kind of known throughout the county. We transitioned from alternative education probably about 2016-17 and then became a part of the re-entry program..'" -Deliverance Temple	Women initiated programming leading to ministry expansion and diversification

Summary of transcript excerpts supporting theme of women as infrastructure of ministry sustainability:

- Women sustaining ministry through intercessory discernment, prayer-linked property release, and relational-spiritual activation: 1, 2
- Women sustaining ministry through maternal and parental formation, maternal-needs programming, and women-centered expansion pathways: 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10
- Women carrying educational vision, developmental-care infrastructure, sacrificial labor, and training infrastructure: 8, 9, 11, 12
- Women-centered relational anchoring, care networks, and maternal burdens sustaining congregational relevance: 13, 14, 15, 16
- Women-initiated community interventions and programming sustaining ministry growth, impact, and diversification: 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22

Appendix C-10. Church–Community Mutuality as a Model of Congregational Sustainability

	Excerpt	Network building subtheme/code
1.	"We fellowship with several denominations, mostly non-denominational ministries." -Sound the Alarm	Inter-denominational and ministry fellowship networks
2.	"We ministered under him for a period of time at his church and then the Lord called us to establish our ministry here in Aliquippa." -Sound the Alarm	Inter-denominational and ministry fellowship networks
3.	"At that location, a Christian school in the area was closing … the school called us and asked. They said 'we heard that you have a vision for a Christian School; how can we help?'" -Sound the Alarm	Educational and institutional networking for leadership development
4.	"So the LORD birthed in our hearts to network with some of the colleges in our area." -Sound the Alarm	Educational and institutional networking for leadership development
5.	"We networked also with the Science Center in Pittsburgh." -Sound the Alarm	Educational and institutional networking for leadership development
6.	"We began to network with the registrar there to take some of our kids who were in 10th Grade and that exposed them to college campuses." -Sound the Alarm	Educational and institutional networking for leadership development

7.	"So we networked with Geneva College for enrollment." -Sound the Alarm	Educational and institutional networking for leadership development
8.	"We also got blessed … as we networked with the businesses around us, they also would compensate the children, the teenagers." -Sound the Alarm	Business and workforce partnership networks
9.	"The Y.E.S program — Youth Empowered to Succeed — where we matched teenagers with career aims and then went out and found placements for them throughout the county that would compensate them." -Sound the Alarm	Business and workforce partnership networks
10.	"The Medical Center, medical offices, other daycare services as well as ours, catering services, photo development companies and other businesses took some of our children under their wings as apprentices." -Sound the Alarm	Business and workforce partnership networks
11.	"We also engaged the parents and had seminars for the parents … partnering with the parents in the molding of the children both for our daycare as well as our Hope Christian Center." -Sound the Alarm	Parent and family partnership networks
12.	"She had a background in criminal justice and she was a probation officer for the community, and they allowed her to start a pilot program." -Deliverance Temple	Community-based professional networks and program incubation
13.	"Out of that program, The Village Keepers' program, that's where the R.O.O.T.S came into existence." -Deliverance Temple	Community-based professional networks and program incubation

14. "As a matter of fact, at the time, we took kids from about Grades 6–12 … Even though they had attended the ROOTS program, they were still considered a part of the Aliquippa School District and Aliquippa School District also had a worker that would come in everyday into our program and make sure that we were in compliance with the Aliquippa School District. So, we were definitely an extension of the Aliquippa School District." - Deliverance Temple	School district, county, and justice-system networks
15. "Being tied in to the juvenile probation of Beaver County, some were referred to us, court-ordered." -Deliverance Temple	School district, county, and justice-system networks
16. "The church was really a support system during these times… Some needed a babysitter… Can you keep my kids while I'm gone?" -Deliverance Temple	Reciprocal neighborhood care and practical mutual aid
17. "We transitioned from alternative education probably about 2016–17 and then became a part of the re-entry program … and we were tied in with the county with that." -Deliverance Temple	School district, county, and justice-system networks
18. "The support system kicked in for those that were less fortunate… The church was a place, the local church community was a place because we were connected to the local community. But the connection to the community, that was the big piece." – Deliverance Temple	Reciprocal neighborhood care and practical mutual aid

Summary of transcript excerpts supporting theme of church–community mutuality as a model of congregational sustainability:

- Inter-denominational and ministry fellowship networks: 1, 2
- Educational and institutional networking for leadership development: 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
- Business and workforce partnership networks: 8, 9, 10
- Parent and family partnership networks: 11
- Community-based professional networks and program incubation: 12, 13
- School district, county, and justice-system networks: 14, 15, 17
- Reciprocal neighborhood care and practical mutual aid: 16, 18

Appendix C-11. Institutional Friction and Financial Gatekeeping

	Excerpt	Institutional friction and financial gatekeeping subtheme/code
1.	"Some churches are more financially stable than other churches, and if you're not careful, the one that's less fortunate, will feel inferior to those churches that seem to, or appear to have everything together." -Deliverance Temple	Economic disparity between churches
2.	"It may not be a whole lot. They may not have a diamond chandelier but what we have God gave it to us and this is ours." -Deliverance Temple	Economic disparity between churches
3.	"We've had our share of people that had very, very little. We've had our share of individuals that were on Welfare. We've had our share of people that were unemployed." -Deliverance Temple	Economic disparity between churches
4.	"Probably most of the ministry, most of the time I've been here." [in response to whether the church had more lower-income people than affluent people] -Deliverance Temple	Economic disparity between churches
5.	"There's no set formula in our churches." -Deliverance Temple	Improvised and unstable pastoral compensation
6.	"Whatever is collected for us that day, we would accept it and keep it moving. Sometimes, it's little or nothing. Sometimes, it's more." -Deliverance Temple	Improvised and unstable pastoral compensation
7.	"In your local church, it's up to the local body to come up with a formula to be able to support the pastor." -Deliverance Temple	Improvised and unstable pastoral compensation
8.	"Some churches are not as fortunate enough to be able to support a pastor financially on a full time level. Therefore, the pastor has a secular job." -Deliverance Temple	Improvised and unstable pastoral compensation
9.	"The secular job sustains him so that he may be able to do ministry because ministry is his passion." -Deliverance Temple	Improvised and unstable pastoral compensation

10. “Most of our pastors are not on salary.” -Deliverance Temple	Bivocational resilience and salary limitations
11. “A lot of our churches are just collecting finances to be able to stay afloat, keep the doors open, keep the lights on, keep the gas on, keep the water running…” -Deliverance Temple	Bivocational resilience and salary limitations
12. “Salaries are a luxury in some of our churches.” -Deliverance Temple	Bivocational resilience and salary limitations
13. “It’s not enough to support a pastor and his family. It is a missionary call.” -Deliverance Temple	Bivocational resilience and salary limitations
14. “You will find that most of our churches in this community, the pastors have secular jobs, including myself.” -Deliverance Temple	Bivocational resilience and salary limitations
15. “At that time, we weren’t savvy, we didn’t know anything about grants. All we had was a desire to help.” -Sound the Alarm	Restricted access to formal funding and credentialed infrastructure
16. “We didn’t go outside of our church… to seek money, to solicit any monies. We were just following the vision that we had.” -Sound the Alarm	Restricted access to formal funding and credentialed infrastructure
17. “What we did have was not monies that we can really manage their whole household, but looking to God too. So faith is stretched.” -Sound the Alarm	Restricted access to formal funding and credentialed infrastructure
18. “We brought in a sister from Florida to start training and teaching those who didn’t have any degree in education, maybe just high school degrees… train them and let’s empower them. Give them a job.” -Sound the Alarm	Restricted access to formal funding and credentialed infrastructure

Summary of Institutional Friction and Financial Gatekeeping Theme Supporting Transcript Excerpts:

- Economic disparity between churches: 1, 2, 3, 4
- Improvised and unstable pastoral compensation: 5, 6, 7, 8, 9
- Bivocational resilience and salary limitations: 10, 11, 12, 13, 14
- Restricted access to formal funding and credentialed infrastructure: 15, 16, 17, 18

Appendix C-12: Supernatural guidance and divine resourcing as operational theology transcript excerpts

	Excerpt	Divine resourcing amid scarcity subtheme/code
1.	"They gave us that property there to use to reach the community." -Sound the Alarm	Miraculous provision through property and institutional openings
2.	"We went from 900 square feet of space to 10,000 square feet of space. So God was increasing us as we went." -Sound the Alarm	Provision through growth, partnerships, and program support
3.	"Folks would ask how we were financed, and how does the Lord finance us? At that time, we weren't savvy, we didn't know anything about grants. All we had was a desire to help." -Sound the Alarm	Supernatural financial capacity
4.	"We went from 900 square feet of space to 10,000 square feet of space. So God was increasing us as we went." -Sound the Alarm	Provision through divine expansion
5.	"So a lot of the monies came from our ministry, from the tithes of our members, from the offerings of our membership, and donors." -Sound the Alarm	Theocentric funding
6.	"Donors, just folks pouring into us. Seeing our works, seeing our efforts that we thought were so small at that time but pouring finances into our work…" -Sound the Alarm	Supernatural provision of donors
7.	"As we networked with the businesses around us, they also would compensate the children, the teenagers." -Sound the Alarm	Provision through divinely-inspired partnerships and program support

8. "We couldn't offer science on the level that we desired to, so we networked also with the Science Center in Pittsburgh, and to Geneva College." -Sound the Alarm	Provision through divinely-inspired partnerships and program support
9. "While continuing a Bible study in our home and having a need for finance to secure the building, a young man who had been attending our Bible studies from another denominational church, approached us and gave us the exact amount of monies that we needed to secure the building." -Sound the Alarm	Supernatural provision of donors
10. "We didn't even have monies to even move from our home into a building…We didn't even have money, you know, for the rent or to rent the building. He put the monies in our hands" -Sound the Alarm	Theological framing of provision under scarcity
11. "The figure that the man gave us was the exact amount of money that we needed. Now we needed the money on a Monday. He came on a Friday and gave us the money that we needed on Monday." -Sound the Alarm	Supernatural provision of donors
12. "And we were just looking to God to provide 'cause we had nothing. And He did." -Sound the Alarm	Scarcity preceding provision
13. "At that time, we did not have money to clean up the property and God is so wonderful, money began to flow into the ministry for clean up…" -Sound the Alarm	Scarcity preceding provision
14. "He put the monies in our hands." -Sound the Alarm	Provision through people, donors, and giving
15. "The Lord allowed us to secure that building up there… He opened doors where there were no doors. He gave us favor with people that don't know why He gave us favor." -Deliverance Temple	Provision through divine intervention
16. "I believe that God will always make a way for the needs to be met in the lives of the people that's connected to the kingdom." -Deliverance Temple	Theological framing of provision under scarcity

17. “The support system kicked in for those that were less fortunate, for God always had someone within the ministry and the circle and the family that had resources and means.” -Deliverance Temple	Theological framing of provision under scarcity
18. “God always had someone within the ministry and the circle and the family that had resources and means.” -Deliverance Temple	Divine provision through people and relationships
19. “God strategically places people in places to be a blessing to someone.” -Deliverance Temple	Provision through divinely placed persons
20. “I believe that everything that God created was created to meet a need.” -Deliverance Temple	Provision as theological worldview
21. “Even sometime when we don’t know understand what’s going on. It’s called blind faith. God’s in control, Lord, you do what you do. We’re just servants of yours. That’s why we keep the doors open.” -Deliverance Temple	Provision through blind faith
22. “The local church in the community was in place because we were connected to the community. We understood the times we lived in.”	Divine guidance through embedded presence
23. “An opportunity came up for us to purchase a building on Franklin Avenue, which is right in the heart of Aliquippa.”	Opportunity received as providential resourcing
24. “That’s why we keep on doing what we do… We don’t know whose life we gonna save… I always say God is up, God is up to something and we are right in the middle of it.”	Ongoing ministry sustained by theological trust

Summary of supernatural guidance and divine resourcing transcript excerpts:

- Miraculous provision through property and institutional openings: 1
- Provision through growth, partnerships, and program support: 2, 7, 8
- Financial provision through theocentric funding and donors: 3, 5, 6, 9, 11, 14, 18
- Provision interpreted through scarcity, faith, and theological trust: 10, 12, 13, 16, 17, 21, 24
- Provision through divine intervention, providential relationships, and worldview: 15, 19, 20
- Divine guidance and providential opportunity: 22, 23