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The Black Church and Communal Empowerment

Darwin Perry
Grand Valley State University

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In 1892, the state of Grand Rapids, Michigan recognized Messiah Missionary Baptist church as the first Black church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. From 1892 until this present moment in time, the Black church in Grand Rapids, Michigan functioned as a vital source of communal empowerment for communities of color. Rather than operating as a mere building for Sunday gatherings, the Black church, the abstract collectivity of Black churches with a predominant membership and or congregation of individuals racially categorized as Black, simultaneously functioned to empower the Black community of Grand Rapids, Michigan.

The great furniture city of Grand Rapids has lured innumerable African Americans by their desire for educational opportunities, better living standards, and employment; however, many Blacks experienced stark contrasts to those aspirations. Historically, Grand Rapids operated under what historian Todd E. Robinson has termed “managerial racism,” which is an inconspicuous and unostentatious form of discrimination and racial exclusion. This unobtrusive form of systematic racism functioned via day-to-day habits and implicit bias towards Black folk in Grand Rapids. The overarching goal of “managerial racism” was to maintain White dominance and White-cultural norms, while simultaneously suppressing non-white individualism. Furthermore, this complex and discreet form of racism created conditions that suppressed Black progress and subjugated the majority of Blacks residing in and or near Grand Rapids into inferior positions via housing, education, economics and job employment. Managerial racism, operating through discriminatory practices and policies, confined many African Americans into declining communities.

Notwithstanding significant organizations aimed toward improving Black conditions such as The Greater Grand Rapids Branch of the NAACP, the Grand Rapids Urban League, and The Grand Rapids Study Club, I contend that the Black church in Grand Rapids possesses the essential components to effectively bring about prolonged communal empowerment.

If the Black church wishes to stay prevalent and efficient in 21st century Grand Rapids, new methods of engaging the community must be discovered and employed. Passing out bean pies and “Get Right Now” flyers is just not enough to bring about prolonged communal empowerment in 21st century Grand Rapids, Michigan. On the other hand, the Black community in Grand Rapids is in need of tangible and practical efforts toward addressing real-life problems, such as a lack of funding toward education, a lack of jobs, fractured families, increasing rates of incarceration, high school dropout rates amongst Black youth, and much more.

By building a historical and contemporary narrative on the interrelationship between the Black church and the Black community in Grand Rapids, Michigan, this study will unveil dormant potentials, resources, and contemporary approaches by which the Black churches in Grand Rapids could more effectively engage the Black community in terms of communal empowerment. The Black church still possesses the potential(s), the resources, and more importantly, the responsibility to bring about prolonged communal empowerment.

*This scholar and faculty mentor have requested that only an abstract be published.