

Spiritual Allyship: Practical Strategies for Black Churches Ministering to Survivors of Gender-Based Violence

By Reverend Doctor Brandon Thomas Crowley

November 2023

Abstract

Spiritual allyship is a theological framework and strategy for Black churches and their clergy. It interrogates the violence of gender-based violence and explores how white supremacy, heteronormativity, sexism, transphobia, and homophobia are weaponized as tools of oppression for survivors.

This article offers strategies to aid Black churches who wish to become allies for survivors of gender-based violence. The concepts discussed within this article describe “spiritual allyship” as a guiding principle for advocates and Black churches seeking to incorporate awareness, counseling, therapy, support groups, legal assistance, medical care, emergency shelter, financial assistance, crisis intervention education, and advocacy into their ministries to foster meaningful healing for Black Christian survivors.

Introduction

Gender-based violence is a sin. Sins are actions, behaviors, or thoughts that are ungodly. Traditionally, sins have been considered violations against the non-human entity known as God. However, such a conclusion is one-sided. Infringing upon the inherent dignity of other individuals is also a sin and perhaps the gravest of all. Gender-based violence is a sinful infringement on the sacred dignity of a person. Gender-based violence is categorized as physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, or other personal harm inflicted on a person to gain or maintain power and control based on actual or perceived sex, gender, sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Gender-based violence may include sexual and other physical assault, murder, rape, sexual harassment or coercion, bullying, verbal abuse, stalking, or intimate relationship violence that includes employment, housing, or educational intimidation and obstruction. It can take the form of elder abuse, child abuse, sex-specific torture, female genital mutilation, early or forced marriage, forced prostitution, human trafficking, sex tourism, and forced or revenge pornography (typically placed online) to name a few.

In America, Black women and LGBTQIAP+ survivors of gender-based violence face unprecedented levels of discrimination, harassment, and exclusion in virtually every institution and setting, including Black churches. Black churches have traditionally ignored the experiences of Black female and Black LGBTQIAP+ survivors of gender-based violence. This causes us to wonder why Black churches can be so silent regarding gender-based violence towards Black women and Black LGBTQIAP+ individuals. As with many faith communities, Black churches have historically struggled to support and respond to the needs of survivors (gay or straight) because of a limited view of gender and sexuality. This has led to sexist, transphobic, and homophobic practices that have harmed LGBTQIAP+ and Black female survivors.

As a Gay African American pastor and theologian, I believe that gender-based violence and ignoring its existence is a transgression that the Black church must recognize, apologize for, confront, and subvert, because African American Christianity and Black churches bear its stain. If they want to be churches of liberation, Black churches are responsible for standing with, advocating for, and responding to the cries of survivors of gender-based violence. If Black churches are to become allies, they must be willing to challenge sexist and homophobic practices and create more inclusive worship environments for survivors.

God calls on Black churches to destabilize and abolish the oppressive structures that support gender-based violence. Black churches must begin reconsidering and reinterpreting the oppressive categories of gender and sexuality. Black churches must redefine what it means to be a whole person beyond oppression. Black churches can and should have a critical role in the prevention, intervention, and resilience of survivors. This vital role includes Black church leaders and parishioners equipping themselves with the knowledge and training to respond with wisdom and care.

A Social and Theological Reflection on the Problem

Many Black churches have failed Black female and Black LGBTQIA+ survivors of gender-based violence by ignoring them. Silence, secrecy, and avoidance are the biggest threats to Black church allyship. The silence of Black churches not only supports complicity but also protects the perpetrators of sexual and domestic violence. This harsh reality starkly contrasts Black churches' reputation as places of justice, spiritual healing, and safety. Black churches can be sources of recovery or traumatic roadblocks. Some obstacles include:

- o a cultural unwillingness to have conversations about sex and sexuality;
- o the belief that "it doesn't happen here;" or
- o the belief that "it's not enough of a problem to merit concern."

These assumptions are drenched in the notion that denial is a valid solution to addressing domestic and sexual violence. In most cases, Black churches are silent about gender-based violence, but loud with their usage and applications of suffering in sermons and Bible studies.

Another obstacle that prevents Black churches from being places of spiritual healing and safety for survivors is the theological hindrances of sexist, homophobic, and transphobic rhetoric within many Black Christian interpretations of scripture and tradition. Black Protestantism is often highly puritanical. Some Black churches privilege toxic masculinity and toxic cis-gendered femininity by utilizing oppressive theological metaphors like Jezebel, Delilah, and Mary of Magdala (whom they teach was a prostitute), which gives credence to the belief that such individuals do not deserve safety. This goes hand-in-hand with the belief in "othered" bodies as undeserving of protection. In other words, white-middle-class-American puritanical society has woven itself into the tapestry of American Christianity. Puritanicalism has become an inescapable cesspool of oppression where the human trafficking of Black bodies and acts of gender-based violence against Black bodies thrive with great enthusiasm or at least silence as consent.

For this reason, Black churches are often roadblocks for those who wish to heal from gender-based violence. Some of these obstructions also include the obsession that some Black churches have with certain theologies of the cross that prioritize beliefs about long-suffering and forgiveness as Christian mandates, which encourages abused persons to remain in abusive relationships and oblige survivors to forgive their abusers even if they put themselves at risk.

Historically, churches have used theologies about the salvific nature of Christ's suffering on the cross to prioritize the belief that survivors of gender-based violence should interpret their suffering as a form of becoming more like Christ through suffering. This suggests that persons should remain in abusive marriages, and it also coerces survivors into forgiving their abusers, as did Christ his abusers on the cross. Survivors also are told to endure domestic violence in the name of God because the Bible says, "Wives submit to your husbands." Pastors and pastoral counselors should never use scripture to encourage an abused person to remain with their abuser. Sadly, most existing Black churches are unwilling to abandon their convictions/beliefs

related to gender roles and sexuality. Black churches must learn that silence and denial about domestic and sexual violence are hostile to the mission of Christ and abusive to gender-based violence survivors.

Towards a Black Congregational Response to Gender-Based Violence

Suppose Black churches wish to be the body of Christ for survivors. In that case, they should work to dismantle heteronormativity for the sake of the oppressed and challenge sexist and homophobic practices and create more inclusive worship environments for survivors. They must respond without hesitation and thoroughly when they become aware of gender-based violence in their churches.

Spiritual allyship is a great tool to combat sexism and homophobia in Black churches. It is the process through which new dialogues on gender-based violence and frames of resilience are constructed. Spiritual allyship also creates brave spaces for congregations to freely see things in a different light and listen to survival narratives with patience and care. Spiritual allyship refers to active and intentional support for the human spirits and souls of persons whose marginalization has been produced by their identity as a survivor of gender-based violence. If gender-based violence is a sin, then spiritual allyship is a virtue. The spiritual aspect of this tool of allyship refers to the moral compasses and inner awareness of followers of Christ. The Christian spirituality to which I refer in this instance is a way of being in the world that pushes humans to think beyond themselves into a realm of selflessness that mirrors the sacrificial nature of Christ's arrival and departure. As God in flesh, Jesus's arrival was a sacrifice of the eternal bliss of heaven, and his departure was a self-sacrificial act of empathy, pardon, and allyship.

“ If gender-based violence is a sin, then spiritual allyship is a virtue. ”

When Christians sacrifice their privileges on the altars of justice and equity, it becomes an act of spiritual allyship. It is the spiritual aspect of spiritual allyship that makes it effective. Spiritual allyship is rooted in the belief Christian justice is rooted in the ethical and moral principles of Jesus that should guide our behaviors and interactions with others, especially the marginalized. Spiritual allyship is a Christian responsibility rooted in holy hospitality and the transcendence of ego. Spiritual allyship is less concerned with fulfillment through religious piety and rituals and more concerned with religious practices as methods of companionship rooted in educational initiatives, public policy reformation, training for clergy, and creating supportive and responsible Black Christian spaces.

The spiritual aspects of spiritual allyship are rooted in the allegiance to a person's devotion to and connection with the divine. Spiritual allyship is a type of sacred transcendence that aims above the sexist and patriarchal networks within Black churches. It finds courage in and relies on universal energy, divine powers, and

inspiration beyond the material world; spiritual allyship is a sacred praxis that is of God! Spiritual allyship is a type of interconnectedness with survivors that fosters a sense of Christian responsibility. As a product of inner exploration and self-reflection, spiritual allyship centers on the nature of suffering and the significance of human companionship. Companionship is the crux of spiritual allyship. Companionship is a moral compulsion that presses Christians to guide, listen, provide assistance, and walk alongside another person. The conditions for spiritual allyship should always be non-predatorial. Christians should use discernment or the existence of a communicated need for help to determine when intervention or guidance is necessary.

Concrete Steps for Practicing Spiritual Allyship in Twenty-First Century Black Churches

The allyship in spiritual allyship refers to a type of Christian partnership and companionship with survivors that is personal and subjective. It is both subjective and personal because, in the words of Martin King, Jr., “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Christians are obligated to offer spiritual support, food, clothing, housing shelter, pastoral counseling, and referrals to appropriate services to survivors. Spiritual allyship is also an instinctive Christian act of courage. It reveals and exposes the intricacies and complexities of an unjust system of evil. It seeks to demolish and reimagine systems with a preferential option for survivors of gender-based violence. Many Black churches struggle with having conversations about gender-based violence. They believe that the institutional risk of having these conversations is too high. They fail to realize that silence equals complicity. But Black churches that are true allies for the oppressed and survivors are congregations that cultivate serious relationships with local helplines, domestic violence organizations, and legal resources. To be an ally means to be the Body of Christ in action.

Spiritual allyship is also a tool that goes beyond mere empathy and towards a framework that churches can use to facilitate new dialogues on gender-based violence. This process begins with a congregational confession of complicity, but it should not end there. Next, a congregation should deeply listen to survival narratives with patience and care. By this, I mean that Black churches should educate themselves on the varying experiences, contextual violation histories, and current concerns of survivors within a particular congregation. This level of listening should include a deep analysis of the systemic disadvantages of survivors within their contexts and broader society. These disadvantages may include financial instability, housing insecurity, a lack of legal resources, mental unwellness, and a lack of immediate solutions for the continued threats of gender-based violence. Primary solutions may include immediate but also intermediary safe housing. Placing a survivor within a place or shelter away from the abuser can be paramount, but such help is only temporary. Even such temporality requires a congregation to have communal connections with other long-term options. These options vary from state to state and from city to city.

For this reason, a congregation’s accessibility and awareness of such resources are contingent upon their participation and pre-existing relationships with the available resources. Reinventing the wheel is not necessary. Black churches cannot provide

survivors with every resource needed to survive, but they can direct them to the appropriate resources. This is especially true of small churches (those with fewer than one hundred members). The majority of Black churches in America are small churches.

In addition to directing survivors toward the needed resources, Black churches should learn to do no harm! By this, I mean that Black churches must begin to profile leaders. They must check for criminal histories and train their leaders about sexual aggression and gender-based and anti-trans violence. Leaders should be informed. Sexual harassment is not restricted to abuses such as the invasion of the body by force, rape, or unwanted forms of physical behavior.¹ Criminal screenings done with specific parameters can help churches build ministry teams they can trust while mitigating risks and protecting the church's reputation and the reputations of all involved.

Further, all leaders should be careful when making physical contact with members. Churches should also have well-written and well-known policies about gender-based violence and sexual harassment.² These policies should include clear messaging about leaders not engaging in romantic or sexual relationships with other staff members or members of congregations. Even when an individual's intentions are pure, a congregational leader should never touch parishioners without their permission.³

Pastors and church leaders are responsible for ensuring that parishioners and employees know they have the right not to be violated. Leaders must be careful never to behave in a way that would cause a person to become squeamish or uncomfortable. Female congregants have endured inappropriate touching in Black churches. They may stay silent because they are confused, to avoid causing a problem, or because they fear losing their position in a church, but this is unfair to the recipient of the aggression. The rules around hugging are emblematic of what I have formerly stated and can be quite simple:

- 1 You should never initiate physical contact without permission.⁴
- 2 If you want to hug someone, ask first, and be prepared to normalize and graciously accept their no if they decline your offer.⁵
- 3 If they accept your offer, do not hug the person for too long.⁶

This is important because many people do not want hugs or to be touched at all. Persons should never be forced to fellowship by giving or receiving physical

¹ Francois, Willie Dwayne., Simmons, Martha. *Christian Minister's Manual: For the Pulpit and Public Square for All Denominations*. (Atlanta, GA: The African American Pulpit Press, 2017), 29-31.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

touch.⁷ In addition to the issue of contact, there is also the matter of language. Pastors and church leaders should avoid giving parishioners unwanted comments on their appearances, style, clothes, hair, shoes, perfume, or body parts. For some, giving a person a nice compliment may seem innocent. However, any unwanted touch or excessive commentary is violent to the recipient and wrong. Countless female clergy, queer clergy, and musicians have been harassed in churches. It is also inappropriate for parishioners to harass their pastors and congregational leaders.

“ Persons should never be forced to fellowship by giving or receiving physical touch.⁷ ”

First, twenty-first Century Black churches must become spaces where Black victims of gender-based violence can find spiritual care and safety. Twenty-first-century Black churches must rekindle and broaden the Black church’s historical notion of African American ecclesial courage by resurrecting the Black Christian ideal of communal concern and charity. Second, provide Black women and Black LGBTQIAP+ victims of gender-based violence with the spiritual tools to believe in a God after trauma. In order for this to happen, Black churches must offer proactive training and education on gender-based violence to prepare all staff persons to minister to survivors. Third, twenty-first Century Black churches must be open to creating partnerships with like-minded organizations.

Black Churches Can Foster Spiritual Health and Justice for Survivors

Until this point in my article, I have discussed how Black churches must grow to broaden their imaginations and become less of a threat to the safety of Black women and Black LGBTQIAP+ persons, and citadels of hope and resilience. However, I do not want to lose sight of the aspects of Black communal Christianity that inspire strength and Black instincts of survival. The communal elements of Black churches often create meaningful pockets of advocacy for survivors of intimate partner violence, local domestic violence, and survivors of violence programs. These elements become their backbones of support and intervention. By this, I mean that survivors cannot survive in isolation. Advocates and professional agencies for survivors of gender-based violence must understand the importance of Black churches for the survival of Christian victims. Black female and LGBTQIA Christian survivors need their advocates to understand the importance of partnering with Black churches to secure spiritual justice for their clients. Black churches should develop social partnerships with their:

- o local health departments;
- o women’s clinics;
- o mental health resources;
- o methadone clinics; and
- o substance abuse treatment programs.

⁷ Ibid.

These partnerships help Black churches to offer survivors wrap-around (wholistic) services and full support for children, women, or men who need drug rehabilitation, healthcare, employment, housing, academic support, and trauma therapy. When churches have pre-existing relationships with social health providers, they are better equipped to provide support for survivors. Advocates need to understand that if they are going to make social change and create spiritual justice for Black female and LGBTQIA survivors that church partnerships are not one-sided. Advocates should not wait on Black churches to seek their assistance. Advocates should see the partnership as a reciprocal relationship that begins and ends with empathy and trust. Advocates need not be afraid to make the first move instead of waiting for the infamously ambiguous “them” to start the conversation. Advocates should also avoid relying on Black churches to fix this issue independently. There are some shifts and changes that need to happen in Black churches, and there are also shifts and changes that need to occur in the arena of professional advocacy and federally/private funded agencies. Advocates have assumed they could do this work in isolation for too long. Advocates could benefit from investing in partnerships with Black churches. These partnerships are paramount to the survival of Black female and LGBTQIAP+ survivors of gender-based violence.

But what are the practical components for advocating support for survivors in Black churches? Initially, agencies and advocates must create communal liaison and community engagement positions. Black gender-based violence consultants should strategically partner with Black churches to educate, train, and financially support their efforts to become safe, brave, and courageous spaces for Black female and LGBTQIAP+ survivors. There is a difference between being a gender-based violence consultant and an advocate. A gender-based violence consultant is a professional trained to guide and advise churches about recognizing, responding to, addressing, and preventing gender-based violence. A gender-based violence advocate is a well-meaning parishioner of a Black church who wishes to support survivors of gender-based violence and is not professionally trained in gender-based violence survival. Advocates of the Black Church are the best ones (not only) to initiate these partnerships. Like other communities, Black churches are more open to those with whom they can identify. The World Council of Churches declared that concrete action by churches everywhere is necessary to counter the persistent scourge of sexual and gender-based violence.⁸

⁸ Susannah Herzel, *A Voice for Women: The Women’s Department of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: Women in Church and Society, WCC Publications, 1981), 7–8; Natalie Maxon, *Journey for Justice: The Story of Women in the WCC* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), 7; World Council of Churches Sub-Unit on Women in Church and Society, “Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women 1988–1998” (Decade Brochure) (Geneva: WCC Publications, [1988]), 1; World Council of Churches, *Living Letters: A Report of Visits to the Churches during the Ecumenical Decade Churches in Solidarity with Women* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 16, 45; See World Council of Churches, “Your Story Is My Story, Your Story Is Our Story”: The Decade Festival, Harare, November 1998. Ecumenical Decade: Churches in Solidarity with Women, World Council of Churches (Geneva: Justice, Peace and Creation Team, WCC Publications, 1999), 90–98. <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/churches-are-vital-to-renewed-focus-on-gender-violence-says-wcc>

Because of the intersection of spirituality, religion, and intimate partner violence in the African American community, an intentional partnership between advocates and local Black clergy brings visibility to the issue of gender-based violence. It communicates that violence makes a particular difference. This work could give survivors hope and provide validation and acknowledgment of their experiences while facilitating spiritual healing and likely needed financial assistance and communal support.

Conclusion

When Eddie S. Glaude Jr. was the William S. Todd Professor of Religion and Chair of the Center for African American Studies at Princeton University on April 26, 2010, he wrote a provocative editorial. The piece written for the Huffington Post was titled “The Black Church is Dead!” In the article, Glaude argued that “the idea of this venerable institution as central to Black life and as a repository for the social and moral conscience of the nation had all but disappeared.”⁹

Glaude posited that the concept of socially conscious, morally prophetic, and culturally relevant Black churches is a phenomenon of the past because the Black church has grown silent concerning matters of human suffering.¹⁰ Most of Glaude’s argument is rooted in social criticism and thoughtful provocation. However, the latter half is deliberately prescriptive. He tells Black churches how to resurrect themselves with breaths of new life. According to Glaude, these breaths will enable Black churches to reimagine and rethink what it means to be Black and Christian.¹¹ However dead they may be, Black churches can be brought back to life by breathing something new into their ecclesial structures. Glaude interprets this refreshing breath as a rekindling of the prophetic voices and social progressiveness of pre-Reconstruction Black churches.¹² Through such rekindling, Black churches can regain life and reclaim their original mission to work on behalf of those who suffer most.¹³

As a Black Christian, pastor, and theologian, I believe Eddie Glaude is correct. Largely, the Black Church is indeed dead. However, Christianity is more than just a tradition of sacrifice and death. It is also a way for individual and collective resurrection. Spiritual justice is how Black faith/spirituality/religion/churches can be resurrected with prophetic hope. The Black church must awaken from her death with a calling to do justice. Black churches must pursue justice in the face of white supremacist and heterosexist American culture and Black Christian sexism and homophobia. Justice is the only means by which the tools of oppression and the re-traumatization of

⁹ Eddie S. Glaude, “The Black Church Is Dead.” https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-black-church-is-dead_b_473815.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

survivors of gender-based violence can be dismantled for good. Black churches must learn to reinvigorate and rekindle the historical notion of Black churches and Black spirituality as sources of healing for those who have experienced gender-based violence. Spiritual allyship is a congregational strategy. Spiritual justice is a guiding principle for advocates and Black churches who wish to incorporate trauma-informed human services and innovative pastoral care for LGBTQIAP+ individuals, Black women and girls, and all survivors of gender-based violence.

About the Author

Reverend Doctor Brandon Thomas Crowley is the Senior Pastor of the Historic Myrtle Baptist Church in West Newton, Massachusetts, one of America's oldest Black congregations founded by formerly enslaved persons at the end of Reconstruction and one of the nation's few open and affirming historically Black churches. For a more in-depth exploration of this topic, see Pastor Crowley's book, *Queering Black Churches: Dismantling Heteronormativity in African American Congregations*, published through Oxford University Press in November 2023.

Notice of Federal Funding and Federal Disclaimer. The production and dissemination of this publication was made possible by Grant # 90EV0428-01 from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, The Office of Family Violence Prevention and Services. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The NRCDV welcomes your input. If you have any comments or additional information to provide, please contact our Programs & Prevention Team at nrcdvTA@nrcdv.org.