
HARDSHIPS, GROWTH, AND HOPE: THE EXPERIENCE OF BLACK PASTORAL LEADERS DURING A SEASON OF SOCIAL UNREST AND COVID-19 QUARANTINE

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the perceived effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and George Floyd protests on the leadership experiences and sense of lived calling for nineteen African American pastors in the United States. The findings paint a picture of loss and hardship for Black communities and their pastors but also point to leadership resilience and growth. The pastors in this study also challenge the church in North America to overcome political division by becoming a learning community that engages issues of racial justice and plays a healing role in their communities. The article seeks to highlight the voices and experiences of Black pastors, but also considers the positionality and reflections of the authors as White researchers.

African American pastors and their churches are emerging from a unique historical season in which they faced the challenges and pain of the COVID-19 pandemic and a season of racial unrest and protest. As a global pandemic, COVID-19 hit US urban centers particularly hard with minority communities bearing much of the impact. At the time this study concluded in February 2021, over 500,000 people in the US had died from COVID-19 with

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a disproportionately high number of deaths among Indigenous, Black, and Pacific Islander Americans.¹

Amid the COVID-19 quarantine, the African American community also experienced a rekindled fire of rage and outcry over the taking of George Floyd's life at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer. This vivid demonstration of racial injustice fostered protest, civil disobedience, and unrest throughout the United States and impacted communities, congregations, and pastoral leaders around the nation. The collision of these two phenomena created specific challenges and opportunities for African American pastors, and the purpose of this study was to listen to the personal and professional experiences of these leaders to share their experience and elicit principles for effective pastoral leadership and living out one's calling during a season of hardship.

As researchers living in greater Minneapolis and Los Angeles, we were compelled to understand more deeply the challenges faced by our African American colleagues and brothers and sisters in Christ and to know how they are leading during this season. We were motivated by a desire to understand, learn from, and share their experiences with Black leaders seeking to live into their callings and White leaders seeking to learn from and partner well with Black colleagues. We interviewed pastors from a broad spectrum of gender, age, regional, theological, and political perspectives. Research findings paint a broad picture of loss and hardship for Black communities and their pastors, while also pointing to leadership resilience and growth. The pastors in this study also challenge the church in North America to overcome political

¹ L. Holmes Jr., M. Enwere, J. Williams, B. Ogundele, P. Chavan, T. Piccoli, C. Chinaka, C. Comeaux, L. Pelaez, O. Okundaye, L. Stalnaker, F. Kalle, K. Deepika, G. Philipicien, M. Poleon, G. Ogungbade, H. Elmi, V. John and K. W. Dabney. "Black-White Risk Differentials in COVID-19 (SARS-COV2) Transmission, Mortality and Case Fatality in the United States: Translational Epidemiologic Perspective and Challenges," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17(12) (2020): 4322. APM Research Lab. *The Color of Coronavirus: COVID-19 Deaths by Race and Ethnicity in the U.S.* (AMP Research Lab, 2021).

division by becoming a learning community that recognizes the need to engage in issues of racial justice and play a healing role in their communities.

This study sought to investigate the research question: How do the personal, spiritual, and institutional experiences of African American pastoral leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic and George Floyd protests affect their sense of being able to live out their callings? The need for this study primarily relates to the importance of understanding the experiences of Black pastors during COVID-19 and the racial unrest of 2020-21. Miller and Glanz specifically recommended further research to listen to the personal and professional experiences of Black pastors during COVID-19.² In addition, Lemke's investigation of lived callings points to the need to further understand the ways hardships may contribute to calling clarity.³ This study sought to provide a nuanced exploration of the ways in which Black pastors processed their sense of calling as it relates to the twin hardships of COVID-19 and racial unrest.

Background Literature

Work as Calling Theory (WCT) provided a framework within vocational psychology for exploring the lived callings of African American pastors.⁴ WCT suggests that perceived callings must be enacted or lived out for people to experience work satisfaction and individual well-being. Organizational support, network capital, and prior life experiences have been found to predict elements of lived callings such as entrepreneurial intention, agency perspective,

² J. Miller and J. Glanz. "Learning from the Personal Experiences of Pastoral Leaders During the Covid-19 Quarantine," *Christian Education Journal*, 18(3) (2021): 500.

³ D. L. Lemke. "Perceptions of Career Agency and Career Calling in Mid-career: A Qualitative Investigation," *Journal of Career Assessment* 29(2) (2021): 239.

⁴ R. D. Duffy, B. J. Dik, R. P. Douglas, J. W. England, and B. L. Velez. "Work as a Calling: A Theoretical Model," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 65(4) (2018): 423.

and agency behavior.⁵ Reyes specifically argues that social networks play a critical role in helping marginalized individuals overcome structural challenges to living out their callings.⁶ Other researchers further caution that organizational subcultures that entail inherent gender or racial bias can either limit personal agency or fuel agentic behavior.⁷

Lemke's investigation found that calling is a dynamic lived experience in which hardships foster resilience and growth in living a calling.⁸ He further suggests that calling is a future-oriented concept that emphasizes spiritual formation and lifelong growth in clarity and confidence.⁹ The current study sought to understand whether hardships related to COVID-19 and racial injustice served to clarify and promote the lived callings of African American pastors or diminish their sense of well-being due to a lack of agency or lack of access to opportunity to live out their callings. This study explored perceived connections between lived callings and life hardships.

Leadership theorists also suggest that intentional leadership may be able to transform moments of crisis into systemic change, rapid innovation and problem solving, increased resiliency, and

⁵ E. Niehaus and K. O'Meara. "Invisible but Essential: The Role of Professional Networks in Promoting Faculty Agency in Career Advancement," *Innovative Higher Education* 40(2) (2015): 159. L. R. Tolentino, V. Sedoglavich, V. N. Lu, P. R. J. Garcia, and S. L. D. Restubog. "The Role of Career Adaptability in Predicting Entrepreneurial Intentions: A Moderated Mediation Model," *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 85(3) (2014): 403.

⁶ P. B. Reyes. *The Purpose Gap: Empowering Communities of Color to Find Meaning and Thrive*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 6.

⁷ F. Afioni and C. M. Karam. "The Formative Role of Contextual Hardships in Women's Career Calling," *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 114 (2019): 69. P. Miller and C. Callender. "Black Leaders Matter: Agency, Progression and the Sustainability of BME School Leadership in England," *Journal for Multicultural Education* 12(2) (2018): 183.

⁸ Lemke, "Perceptions of Career Agency," 239.

⁹ D. L. Lemke. "Vocation and Lifelong Spiritual Formation: A Christian Integrative Perspective on Calling in Mid-career," *Christian Education Journal* 17(2) (2020): 301.

new levels of cooperation, even among rivals.¹⁰ Psychologists have found that times of self-reflection correlate with increased well-being.¹¹ Similarly, self-awareness has been shown to increase capacity in day-to-day functioning within one's leadership role.¹² This study sought to further understand the role of self-awareness and self-reflection in helping African American pastors navigate the challenges of COVID-19 and the demands for racial justice in America.

Research Method

Practical Theology and Qualitative Design

Using principles of practical theological interpretation from Richard Osmer, we sought to be spiritually present with and listen to the interpretive reflections of nineteen African American pastoral leaders as they shared their stories of loss and hope during this season of crisis.¹³ The descriptive nature of our research, with its emphasis on the inner experiences and perceptions of African American pastors, led us to adopt a formal qualitative research strategy.¹⁴ After receiving institutional review board approval, we

¹⁰ M. Langan-Riekhof, A. Avanni, and A. Janetti. *Sometimes the World Needs a Crisis: Turning Challenges into Opportunities*. The Brookings Institute (April 10, 2017). <https://www.brookings.edu/research/sometimes-the-world-needs-a-crisis-turning-challenges-into-opportunities>

¹¹ A. Susman-Stillman, S. Lim, A. Meuwissen, and C. Watson. "Reflective Supervision/Consultation and Early Childhood Professionals' Well-being: A Qualitative Analysis of Supervisors' Perspectives," *Early Education and Development*, 31(7) (2020): 1151. M. Yuen and J. A. D. Datu. "Meaning in Life, Connectedness, Academic Self-efficacy, and Personal Self-efficacy: A Winning Combination," *School Psychology International* 42(1) (2021): 79.

¹² O. Boe and T. Holth. "Self-awareness in Military Officers with a High Degree of Developmental Leadership," *Procedia Economics and Finance* 26 (2015): 833. R. M. Randall, L. Kwong, T. Kuivila, B. Levine and M. Kogan. "Building Physicians with Self-awareness," *Physician Leadership Journal* 4(3)(2017): 40.

¹³ R. R. Osmer. *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 1.

¹⁴ Additional information related to the qualitative research design including participant demographics, interview protocol, data analysis, thematic findings, limitations, and recommendations for future research are available from the researchers at dlemke@unwsp.edu or jason.a.miller@biola.edu.

interviewed a diverse group of nineteen Black pastors from across the United States. Interviewees included male (n = 14) and female (n = 5) pastors across the following age groupings: 20-29 (n = 1), 30-39 (n = 2), 40-49 (n = 5), and 50-60 (n = 8), and over 60 (n = 3). Pastoral roles included senior pastor (n = 10), assistant/associate pastor (n = 8), and one chaplain who was heavily involved in the local church. The comparison congregation sizes for those serving in pastoral roles included: 1-299 (n = 6), 300-999 (n = 7), and over 1,000 (n = 5). Six interviews were conducted before the November 2020 election and thirteen were conducted in the two months following the election.

Semistructured virtual interviews averaging seventy-four minutes were conducted using questions designed to help us listen to and describe perspectives on leadership health and career calling during this season of racial unrest and COVID-19 quarantine.¹⁵ Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed using grounded theory methodology.¹⁶ While initially identifying ninety-six potential codes, we narrowed, merged, and examined relationships between these codes to identify a final list of five overarching themes and fifteen categorical subthemes that emerged from our conversations. Only those themes and categories mentioned by at least ten sources or 50% of our interviewees are reported here.¹⁷ Primary themes with total number of interview sources and occurrences or references are reported in Table 1. Categorical subthemes are presented in the findings below.

¹⁵ M. B. Miles, A. M. Huberman, and J. Saldana. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, 3rd ed., (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014).

¹⁶ J. Corbin and A. Strauss. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 4th ed., (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2015). U. Flick. *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 4th ed., (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009). K. Charmaz, K. *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed., (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014). J. W. Creswell and C. N. Poth. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed., (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018).

¹⁷ C. E. Hill, S. Knox, B. J. Thompson, E. N. Williams, S. A. Hess, and N. Ladany. "Consensual Qualitative Research: An Update," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 52(2) (2005): 196.

TABLE 1. *Themes Emerging from the Data Analysis*

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1. Losses Through Hardships (17 Sources, 83 References)
 2. Growth Through Hardships (19 Sources, 101 References)
 3. Leading in Hardship (18 Sources, 62 References)
 4. Need to Engage Racial Justice (17 Sources, 67 References)
 5. The Church's Role in Healing (18 Sources, 64 References)

Researchers and Reflexivity

Our primary vision as researchers was to highlight the voices and experiences of our interviewees. We are aware, to the extent that we can be, of the significant dynamics involved when White researchers seek to research and report on Black experiences. As the primary researchers for this study, the authors are both White middle-aged men with ministry experience in Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, and Tokyo. One of us currently serves as a university educator and the other as an associate director for a nonprofit organization dedicated to human flourishing. We share a common vision for the health and growth of leaders in the ministry. An element of this vision is to see multiethnic churches and their leaders flourish.

Miller's previous research underscored a particular need to understand the unique experiences of African American pastors during the pandemic.¹⁸ While we felt compelled in this study to learn from and tell the story of our Black brothers and sisters as they ministered during a season of racial and social unrest in our nation, we wrestled with whether or not our Whiteness might impact our effectiveness as researchers. Despite our concerns, a number of minority colleagues expressed interest in our study and encouraged us to move ahead.

As researchers, we questioned whether our social privilege as White researchers might create a barrier to recruiting pastors or engaging them in open conversations about their experiences. While we faced initial recruitment challenges, interviewees affirmed our conversations and graciously recommended others to us. As we engaged in conversations about calling and hardship, we recognized that some of our questions were framed from our own perspective,

¹⁸ Miller and Glanz, 500.

and we needed to adapt and provide space for pastors to interpret and respond to our questions in a way that allowed them to both describe and interpret their experiences for us.

We also regularly engaged in self-reflection as researchers to confirm findings and to examine and evaluate potential bias in our analysis and reporting. Two minority colleagues along with peer reviewers for this journal reviewed a draft of this manuscript and provided feedback challenging us to address more clearly ongoing challenges to racial justice and our social location as White researchers.

Through this process, our appreciation for the fact these are not racially neutral conversations was deepened, and we grew in our conviction that a posture of humility was essential. We discovered that the mutual expression of humility by interviewees who took the risk to open up about their joys and sorrows and by researchers as we sought to receive and steward those stories became a key element of our method of practical theology.

As researchers living in greater Minneapolis and Los Angeles, we were initially compelled by a desire to understand, learn from, and share the experiences African American pastors as they sought to lead during this season of pandemic and racial injustice. In the fall of 2020, we became increasingly aware that the politicization of race and pandemic response were polarizing our nation and surfacing in our organizational and religious circles. Serving in predominantly White institutions with many right-leaning constituents, we were troubled by the ease with which the Black struggle against systemic racial injustice appeared to be dismissed and scapegoated through conversations that remained theoretical and demonstrated a lack of awareness regarding the lived experiences of our Black brothers and sisters in ministry. We grew in our conviction regarding the need to humanize these discussions and ground them in practical theological interpretation.

As we conducted interviews, we became increasingly convinced the pastors were sharing stories and addressing key themes that needed to be shared with a broader audience. In all presentations of our findings, we emphasized the voice and experiences of these pastoral leaders. As a result, the thematic findings reported below

emphasize the actual reflections of the pastors, without much input or interpretation, except to contextualize and summarize emergent themes. Following the presentation of each theme, practical implications and researcher self-reflections are provided. We sought to highlight the experiences and pastoral reflections of interviewees in a way that allows the reader to understand and weigh the significance of each theme. The separate discussion of implications and researcher self-reflections provides a secondary space for us to share openly about our own experiences and reflections without deflecting from the significance of what our interviewees had to say. The article concludes with a summary of practical implications for leaders who seek to address these important themes.

Theme One: Losses Through Hardship

In this study, thematic analysis began at the conceptual level in phase one, but concepts were then organized inductively around broader categories and then most broadly around themes in phases two and three. Final data analysis resulted in the identification of five main themes: (a) losses through hardship, (b) growth through hardship, (c) leading in hardship, (d) the need to engage racial justice, and (e) the church's role in healing. These five themes were supported by fifteen underlying categorical subthemes. Key implications and researcher reflections are highlighted at the end of each theme.

Reporting of Interview Findings

The unique toll of COVID-19 and the continued toll of racial injustice as experienced through the George Floyd protests were a significant theme of this study. The depth and scope of loss and hardship were discussed by seventeen of the nineteen leaders in this study. These losses include subthemes such as the effect of COVID-19 on the Black community, personal fear, sadness, and questions, and a Black sense of isolation.

Impact of COVID-19 on the Black Community. COVID-19 was a difficult experience for everyone in 2020, but sixteen of the pastoral leaders in this study specifically discussed the impact of the pandemic on the Black community. Brandon noted, "Everybody

who's Black knows somebody who's died from COVID. We are a grieving community. We see too much death to begin with, we've seen even more." Regarding the sheer numbers, Mikayla recalled receiving ten to twelve calls per day regarding infected members of the community. Garon lamented, "It was devastating.... We've unfortunately had seven people who are members of our congregation pass away from COVID-19. I think it's up to thirty people who are connected to our congregation. ...At one point, I was doing a funeral a week." Anthony recounted seventeen personal losses in his community. Pastors in the Northeast were particularly impacted as COVID-19 ravaged their region, especially during the early months of the pandemic. Briana asserted:

I will tell you, every pastor who lives [in my area], we went through hell. ...We received phone calls and it never stopped ringing. ...You almost got neurotic when you heard a phone call. ...It was rough, my brother. It was a rough time. It was testing for all of us. ...It was testing emotionally. It was testing us physically. It was testing spiritually.

As if the deaths themselves were not difficult enough, these leaders had to navigate the secondary loss of not being able to properly honor and bury loved ones. Darnell recalled going to the home of a beloved community member who had passed away to find the wife and son alone. Normally, the house "would have been cluttered with people coming and going," he said. Anthony reflected, "It's been hard in this season of COVID because there wasn't that normal interpersonal skin on skin, flesh on flesh. I'm hugging you and loving you. ...That's been the hardest part because where I wanted to be near, I could not be near."

These leaders also discussed secondary effects of COVID-19. Angel described an increase in gun violence during the pandemic. Gabriel discussed how a local bank pulled a loan for a church building project because they believed giving would be too low for the church to sustain the payment. Brandon wrestled with increased personal and financial needs in his community and

the added weight of helping people connect with social services. Amari lamented watching children without access to necessary educational tools and equipment face challenges in moving “forward progressively and aggressively while watching students that don’t look like them have all the materials, all the equipment.”

Personal Fear, Sadness, and Questions. In addition to the hardship and loss surrounding COVID-19, twelve pastors highlighted an ongoing sense of fear, sadness and concern for personal safety following the murder of George Floyd. Anthony expressed frustration that preventive tactics are not powerful enough to prevent racial bias. Webster specifically commented on the psychological distress of sharing similar features to Mr. Floyd and Eric Garner. He reflected, “This could be a situation that I could find myself in. ...There’s no way to sit with those kinds of questions, even as a person of faith, and not be shaken by them.” Amari recounted his wife’s concern for his well-being, “You know this George Floyd situation? That could be my husband. Ahmad Aubrey? That could be my husband.”

Pastors also expressed concern for the safety of family and friends who might find themselves in similar positions. Angel expressed, “It’s a lot of fear and anxiety to be a mom and having a Black child. ...My husband gets pulled over and he’s treated like crap.” Malik recollected, “My son got in his car. Twenty-five minutes after leaving his grandparent’s house, he got pulled over for speeding. And the last thing on my mind at that moment was my insurance is going up. The only thing going through my mind...was that he live.” He continues, “I’m having to constantly think through how do I prepare my sons and my daughter.”

Black Sense of Isolation. Twelve pastors expressly described the Black lived experience in terms of being unseen or directly ignored by majority White America. They identified feelings of sadness and numbness when considering the George Floyd murder and the overarching narrative surrounding the value of Black lives. Darnell reflected, “One of the most difficult times in all of this was watching George Floyd die. And I don’t like to picture it because it’s gruesome, it’s gruesome.” Anthony lamented, “We’ve seen video footage of an Eric Garner of George Floyd. Literally in that

moment they're crying out for help and there is no help." Jeremiah and Anthony described "a deep sense of sadness." Angel called it "disheartening." Yashawn summarized, "For me, I would say that I am angry about those things and at the same time numb." Garon said that he was tired.

Gabriel suggested that this sense of isolation and hopelessness is rooted in ongoing offenses against and a lack of support for the Black community. Amari expressed feelings of isolation when a fellow White youth pastor suggested that unarmed Whites are just as likely as unarmed Blacks to be killed. Samuel expressed disappointment when White board members from his board did not attend a march for social justice organized by himself and other Black pastors. He expressed frustration that they were paralyzed by a concern not to be associated with Black Lives Matter. Malik discussed the challenge of working within predominantly White churches. He reflected, "It's been a painful place. There's been some real joys, but to speak really honestly, there's been some parts where it's like I've had more issues within White evangelicals than I have had with unbelievers. It's really kind of a confusing."

Despite the sense of isolation, the pastors described some small cracks of hope connected to some of White America's response to George Floyd's murder. Brandon acknowledged, "You've had a reckoning on race where suddenly for the first time you have more White folks marching saying Black lives matter than Black folks." Garon adds, "What is inspiring is to see more people caring and more people reaching out and more people wanting to partner. ... Predominantly White churches...reaching out to see how we could partner...which has not always been the case." Elijah cautions, however, that sometimes these movements to rally behind justice have only lasted "for a moment."

Reflections on Interview Findings

While there is a strong message of growth and learning, it is important to recognize the profound loss reported by these Black pastors. Even though these leaders and their communities may be used to hardship, the impact of COVID-19 on their communities was devastating and highlighted once again concerns about

systemic injustice. The murder of George Floyd and subsequent social unrest generated hope for a broader awareness of the problem at hand, but it also resurfaced a sense of fear, sadness, and isolation. In addition, political fracturing related to these hardships created frustration and concern that underlying problems may not be addressed. This study clearly shows the depth of emotional pain experienced in the African American community and highlights the need for those outside of their community to listen and seek to understand. The unique sense of loss in the African American community is similarly reported in other studies.¹⁹ As researchers, we were compelled to share these expressions of loss because of their depth and pervasiveness, but also to establish a foundational context for other findings. We personally realized that the loss reported here went far beyond what we have experienced during this season.

Theme Two: Growth Through Hardship

Reporting of Interview Findings

While there has been significant loss and hardship experienced by the leaders in this study, all nineteen pastors on over one hundred occasions discussed how this season has fostered growth. Brandon reflects, “I understand this year, looking back on it now, I see some hidden blessings. ...We have to take it on faith as somehow or another God is at work in this.” Five subthemes describe the ways in which these pastors experienced growth through hardship.

COVID-19 Gains. Despite the challenges of this season, thirteen pastors described positive gains during the pandemic. Some experienced gains in their family. Webster noted, “I think it has slowed me down and made me more mindful of the huge responsibility of just being present and serving my wife and kids as well.” Amari similarly commented, “In some ways, [it’s] been good for my family to slow down and be able to be present with

¹⁹ Holmes et al., 4322. R. K. Wadhwa, P. Wadhwa, P. Gaba, J. F. Figueroa, K. E. Joynt Maddox, R. W. Yeh, and C. Shen. “Variation in COVID-19 Hospitalizations and Deaths across New York City Boroughs,” *JAMA*, 323(21) (2020): 2192.

each other in a different kind of way.” Jada added, “I think, for the family, it brought the unit back together with an opportunity to grow even more.”

Several pastors also discussed the role that the pandemic played in fostering social justice awareness. Anthony suggested that COVID-19 created space for White America to engage the injustice of George Floyd’s murder. Brandon noted, “COVID had everybody home to see it and to stare at it. And enough White Americans were willing to go, ‘Oh my God, is this really who America is?’” Jeremiah described how the combination of COVID-19 quarantine and social justice awareness created opportunities for him to participate in virtual events across the nation.

COVID-19 and George Floyd Forces Need for Personal Health Check. Eleven pastors reflected on the cost of the past year and the need to recharge. Anthony intonates, “You know, I live by saying, You don’t know what you don’t know. ...so I’m going to get myself checked out. Just make sure I’m doing good as I continue to minister to people.” Malik emphasized the fatigue that he and other pastors brought into September, the typical timeframe for launching the ministry year. He observed that several pastors in his region, “were exhausted...tired...capped.” Brianna concluded, “I need to take time for me. There was a time my body really fell apart. And the Lord said this to me, ‘You have an inexhaustible capacity to care and I’m going to diminish it.’ And the Lord is right, which he always is.”

Hardships Fostered Spiritual Growth. Twelve pastoral leaders described how this season of hardship created opportunities for spiritual growth. This was in part due to being afforded time with God. Jada notes, “I’ve been provided the opportunity and I think it’s a godsend and a blessing to spend more time with him.” Jeremiah added, “I think there clearly has been more time to ponder, to be more reflective.” Mikayla pondered:

I think we were pushed back to going before God and seeking his face and saying, God, what is it you want? What are you trying to tell us? What is it you want us to learn from this? What do we need to do? How do

we move forward from here? And I think we grew in prayer because of it.

Elijah added that he had “never leaned so much on Scripture.”

Admitting the challenges of the pandemic and social unrest also created a climate for spiritual growth. Darnell articulated, “The more I see it [COVID-19] ravaging society, the more I think I want to be closer and deeper with God.” Whitney added, “I don’t know what to do with this many people and lock down...I’m going to allow God to help me.” Anthony summarized, “We as a people tend to draw closer to Christ in a moment like this. ...I feel closer to him because I know that he is the sustainer of my life.”

Hardships Fostered Calling Awareness and Growth. Thirteen pastors distinctly described an increase in their sense of calling during this time of hardship and loss. Their sense of calling not only kept them grounded, but it was also confirmed and grew. Whitney reflected, “[This crisis] lets me know that I’m where I’m supposed to be, doing what I’m supposed to be doing.” Garon similarly noted, “I think this is what solidifies it even more. This is what I’m called to do, I couldn’t imagine doing anything else during this season in time.” Gabriel asserted, “My sense of calling has been validated since the COVID season.”

Pastors discussed their ongoing call to teach the word of God and minister to the community of faith, but they also highlighted a deepened appreciation for how they were called to foster change within their communities and further social justice. Anthony reflected, “What I have seen in this season is that God has called me to be a unifier of people and churches.” Darnell described a compulsion to create change. Garon explained, “This is what I’m called to do...my passion and desire to share the gospel, but then also to see transformation take place within our communities.” Yashawn reflected:

I think for me, the events of the last year and a half have really solidified my calling as somebody who needs to be on the front lines in what is this kind of battle for the hearts of humans. ...I know that it is my job to be

about bringing forward justice in the lives of the poor and of racially marginalized groups. My calling is to be about making sure that the gospel is brought to bear in those lives.

Makayla discussed the need for one's calling to be responsive to present issues. She asserted that it is a "dangerous thing is to have a calling and be irrelevant."

Hardships Fostered Community Engagement. Fourteen pastors described how the obstacles of 2020 created space for churches to meet the needs of those around them. Several leaders praised the generosity of their congregations in providing food to those in their communities. Zion described the broadening reach of their food distribution ministry beyond homeless or low income families. Whitney reflected, "We learned how to minister outside the church." Pastors also described congregational efforts to care for their neighbors and attend to social justice concerns in their community. Jeremiah's congregation hosted panel discussions on race for their community. Brianna helped lead marches in protest of George Floyd's murder. Angel described a prayer ministry in the community that focused on the rise in gun violence. Whether the needs were physical, emotional, or spiritual, individual, or communal, the pastors in this study described growth in community engagement. Webster summarized, "We're a stronger, healthier church in some ways than we were this time last year. ... We're serving our community in ways that we simply were not doing a year ago."

Reflections on Interview Findings

As Scripture teaches in James 1:2-4, God uses hardships in the lives of leaders to prompt personal, spiritual, and leadership growth. Leaders are whole beings and these pastors described how the pandemic created space to focus on their families and take inventory of their entire well-being. Hardships also seem to have a way of confirming and clarifying a leader's sense of calling. This season of social unrest specifically caused the leaders in this study

to reflect anew on the pastoral calling to engage one's congregation in addressing issues of justice. Even though living out that calling in a politically fractured climate was challenging, these leaders grew in their clarity and conviction about the importance of pursuing justice.

Hardships also mobilized local congregations to engage their community in broad acts of service. An essential leadership trait is the ability to respond to hardship with a learning attitude, clarified vision, and commitment to unleash followers to address the challenges in their midst. In Scripture, Jesus Christ himself modeled clarity of calling in the midst of hardship, and he challenged his disciples to stay on mission despite the hardships and persecution that they would face. As researchers, we were inspired by the holistic perspective expressed by these pastors. We are concerned that readers listen well before dismissing the importance of social justice in the pastoral callings of these leaders or in their own lives.

Theme Three: Leading in Hardship

Reporting of Interview Findings

Eighteen pastors described how the season of pandemic and social unrest impacted their leadership. They specifically reflected on how past issues influenced their current leadership choices, how scripture served as an anchor for their leadership, how they had to start rethinking what "church" is, and how collaboration is essential moving forward.

Leading from Personal Experience. Eleven pastors described the ways in which their previous experience helped them lead during the time of pandemic and protest. For some, COVID-19 was simply another challenge. Gabriel commended, "Covid is just another added stressor to an already long laundry list of stressors that are going on." In some cases, previous challenges meant that a support structure was already in place. Samuel, Makayla, and Brandon specifically described the benefit of having systems in place to stream worship services.

Several pastors acknowledged the importance of having been previously involved in race conversations. Several asserted that these

were not new conversations in their faith communities. Jeremiah reflected, “When Floyd happened and when just this worldwide response happened, it was, ‘Okay, we already have people in place to kind of handle this.’” Garon summarized, “It’s not new and it wasn’t difficult to talk about...because it’s something we had been engaged with.” Angel added, “I would say that we were already... protesting...advocating for parents and family members...doing funerals...advocacy work. It was just a different crisis, but the same work.” Webster pointed out that it was the pastors who had not already been leading in this conversation who were most likely to feel pushback.

Scripture as an Anchor of Leadership. Fourteen pastors specifically discussed the need to turn to God’s word as an anchor for their leadership. Samuel asserted, “I think you for sure have to go to the text. I feel like you can just become a talking head. ... You’re supposed to be equipping the saints with the truth.” Caleb discussed “...looking more to Scripture” to understand “what are the principles” because “I’m more of a Christian than I am an American.” Numerous pastors simply quoted sections of Scripture throughout their interview. Reflecting on James 1:19, Amari challenged, “Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to become angry. That’s been my theme. Almost like my mantra.” Angel quoted 1 Peter 5:7, “Cast all your fears on him because he cares for you.” Malik walked through the narrative of Scripture to describe how God’s people face crisis in Genesis, Numbers, Acts, 1 Corinthians, etc. He commented, “I’ve always had a love for God’s word and I’m grateful. I tell people I’m handcuffed to the text and I make no bones about it and I’m not ashamed of it.” Yashawn described the importance of turning to Scripture to understand how God would have us deal with social injustice today. He concluded, “The truth has not changed. What’s good has not changed. Jesus has not changed.”

Forcing Questions about What Church is in the Present and Future. Although these pastors found themselves leaning on God’s word and adapting to current challenges, fourteen of them discussed the ways in which recent hardships raised explicit questions about the what the church might look like moving forward. Darnell noted, “To the

wider church, the question is, is it building a theater to perform or is it a place to care for the sick?" Anthony added, "We were allowed to sleep in an age of the megachurch, the entertainment ministry, the four walls focus, you come to us. ...What COVID forced the church overall to do, you had to rethink what church was." Malik reflected, "It's made the church have to pivot and think of doing ministry differently. Even just reframing things that we often say. That church is not a building, it's people. And that we gather to be the church scattered. So, in ways, churches have had to rethink how they do ministry." Whitney indicated that this might involve doing more ministry outside of the church walls. Amari suggested that this season is a call for the church to press into becoming a truly diverse community.

Opportunity and Need for Relationships and Collaboration. Ten pastors discussed the increased sense of need to collaborate with other leaders. Samuel recollected, "I had pastors calling me, asking me, 'Hey, can we come and use your pulpit, stage, and camera to do our service because we don't have that in place here?'" Reflecting on the importance of conversing and processing with other leaders, Elijah commented, "It's sometimes all you have is your own thoughts. Being around a group of people who can help you process those thoughts is extremely helpful." Makayla's church learned that they could use their resources to help other churches care for members who were struggling with COVID-19. While some collaboration emerged, Webster expressed frustration at the barriers he sometimes encountered in partnering with corporate or secular nonprofit organizations.

Reflections on Interview Findings

Leading during times of hardship caused these pastors to examine their leadership values and perspectives. First, the pastors leaned on Scripture as their primary source of wisdom and stability. During a controversial season, these pastors understood the importance of Scripture in their private and public leadership. Second, they drew upon personal experiences of previous hardship to help them lead during this time of crisis. Many acknowledged that the hardships related to COVID-19 and the social unrest

following the murder of George Floyd were not new. Leaders do well to draw upon their own experiences and the experiences of others to lead during times of hardship. Third, they allowed current hardships to challenge their perspectives on the best way to lead. This season raised important questions about the nature of the church for these pastors. Several questioned passive approaches to church life and called for greater engagement. Pastoral leaders during this time are faced with important questions regarding how to clarify the core purposes of the church and lead congregations to live into those purposes. Finally, times of hardship caused these pastors to recognize the importance of and need to collaborate with others. As researchers, we listened to pastors who had great certainty about the authority of Scripture and a deep desire to adapt their leadership to meet the demands of their current context. Emphasizing leadership clarity and collaboration is a clear message for all religious leaders regardless of denominational or political affiliation.

Theme Four: Need to Engage Racial Justice

Reporting of Interview Findings

As a fourth theme, seventeen pastors on sixty-seven occasions discussed the need to engage racial justice. Four subthemes paint a picture of what these pastors perceive to involve political division in the church, a lingering lack of racial awareness, and a need for the White church in particular to learn. Although this theme presents a challenge to greater engagement, it is important to note that these pastors also hold a clear conviction that the local church can play an important role in spiritual, physical, and racial healing, which is the subject of theme five.

Political Division in the Church. Even though there were no interview questions directly related to politics, eleven pastors discussed the ways they perceived that COVID-19 and racial unrest following the murder of George Floyd inflamed a political divide in the church. Samuel specifically described the challenge of pastoring a church comprised of White evangelicals, Black liberals, and Hispanic moderates in which some believe that COVID-19

is a conspiracy and others reject notions of conspiracy in favor of medical advice coming from the government. Malik expressed frustration with the tendency of some on both political extremes to listen undiscerningly to the media and even “weaponize the Word in the midst of COVID quarantine.”

Amari asserted, “As a pastoral leader, I’ve faced more opposition during COVID than I’ve ever faced before. Factoring in the racial tension, the politics, all of it, it’s really been demoralizing as a leader.” Brandon added, “There’s been a great unmasking of the church that doesn’t really believe what it says it believes.” Yashawn expressed frustration at the politics of COVID-19 during a season in which the church should have mourned. He reflected, “What should have been a place of mourning became a place of politics. I think for me, that’s been very draining, very frustrating.” Brandon expressed frustration at the general lack of willingness to sacrifice for the sake of others. Amari concluded that pastors have a responsibility to listen to different perspectives and to lead in a way that brings love and healing to a community of broken people.

Several pastors also discussed political tensions surrounding racial justice in their congregations. Samuel offered:

Oh, now we got folks talking about not coming back and [saying] “I didn’t really know the church was like that. I thought, because we’re multiethnic, everybody loves everybody.” [And] “I cannot believe George made that comment or posted a Black Lives Matter billboard on his Facebook. Doesn’t he know that’s a Marxist organization and they’re against the nuclear family? And he’s Christian, so how could he?” So, I have been in ‘put out fire’ mode for a long time.

Anthony offered a very different take on the political/ideological tensions in his congregation:

In my church, as a pastor, we have people on all sides of the issue. You have your social justice awareness type of people that are in the church and the question they continue to ask is, ‘How much more do we have to

take? How much longer do we have to suffer through this? Have we not as a race been through enough?... Have we not endured slavery? Have we not endured the hangings and the lynchings?’ But then on the flip side, I’m having to minister to people who, when they hear White privilege or if they hear systematic racism, they struggle with that, and they say that doesn’t exist. It’s this denial that the problem that Black people are having is a problem.

Malik further commented on the challenge of discussing racial justice: “For some strange reason, people keep thinking that our discussion even before George Floyd around God’s heart for our people in the nations was Marxism, left-wing politics.” He expressed frustration that those raising these critiques do not engage in biblical conversations, but only turn to “cultural, political and sociological issues.” Jeremiah discussed the unfortunate predictability of evangelical backlash to racial injustice by deflecting toward topics like Black Lives Matter and critical race theory. Amari suggested that these responses are abusive. Caleb and Jeremiah expressed disappointment that their church leaders preferred to avoid discussions of racial injustice.

While there is a certain pressure to avoid social and political issues, Yashawn commented on the importance of engagement:

I think where we have come down solidly is that a theology that is not addressing the issues of the day is not a worthy theology. So, I think as church leaders we have decided to engage these cultural things because you cannot keep a multiethnic community together if you aren’t engaging in these things, because the undercurrent of multiethnic communities is silent mistrust. And if you don’t surface that, then people are willing to stay in that silent mistrust, but they never become brother and sister in Christ.

Makayla discussed a vision for a multicultural church in which diverse experience and viewpoint is celebrated and polarized and

monocultural assumptions are questioned. Her vision is motivated by her understanding of what the people of God will be in the future.

Lingering Lack of Racial Awareness. Twelve pastors discussed the lingering lack of racial awareness in the church and American society. Samuel discussed how Black and Brown communities feel that racial injustice is so rampant that they expect people in our country to be aware and “actively doing something about it.” He also pointed out that minority communities play an important role in informing and spreading awareness among those who are receptive and seeking to learn about experiences of injustice. Elijah recognized that facing racism is also a challenge for people of color, “I don’t think our community, our African American community, when it comes to racism, we still don’t know how to bring people together. So most people assume that because of our color, we knew. We’re broken ourselves!” Malik discussed the frustration of working in a church in which people question the need to address racial issues when he views racial justice as a natural outflow of a healthy understanding of the *imago Dei* and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Several pastors discussed the way in which the George Floyd murder forced real conversations. Zion summarized, “I’m thankful for the voice of the George Floyd video. Thankful for the voice of that video because it...spoke something that people had to hear because they witnessed it. ...It gave opportunity for discussion... and brought to light what some people were complaining about.” Brandon also discussed how COVID-19 heightened awareness of some of the structural challenges that people of color face in terms of gaining access to health care. Jada emphasized the importance of multifaith dialog and relationships as an opportunity emerging during this season. She challenges, “The conversations can’t be superficial. They have to be sincere. There has to be a heart to make a change.”

Other pastors reminded that lasting change takes time. Elijah questioned, “How long are they going to really fight for this? I mean, is this just the theme of the day or is this really something that people are concerned about and that they really want to jump

in to change?” Darnell reflects, “Whatever needs to change has to be sustained for a consistent period...then it changes the mindset. ... I am hungry for a change that will last.” Jeremiah emphasized sustained discipleship so that people respond to injustice in the fruit of the Spirit rather than anger and rage. Brandon concludes, “There needs to be moral leaders among the privileged groups who challenge the immoralities, all the illegalities, the structural discrimination...”

Need for the White Church to Learn. As another subtheme, thirteen pastors on thirty-three occasions discussed the need for the White church to learn more about racial injustice. Samuel expressed frustration with the hesitancy of White pastors to protest with Black and Brown pastors because Black Lives Matter protests were happening in a nearby vicinity. Jeremiah similarly noted that many within the evangelical church started to focus on ancillary issues instead of the problem of racism. Brandon commented on how intentional leadership redirection and reaction demonstrates a lack of awareness and complicity in racialization. He noted, “While we were having Black Lives Matter protests, they were having Blue Lives Matter protests. And that is a blatantly racist reaction.” Yashawn described his own realization that the church is not as far along in terms of reconciliation as he thought. He summarized, “I believed we were further than we were and then was very, very disappointed when I found out that the Christian community was really just not very far down the road as far as this is concerned.” Angel, Anthony and Brandon expressed caution at the White evangelical community’s tendency to prioritize Republicanism and Trumpism over the dignity of their Black and Brown brothers and sisters.

Anthony recommended turning from a posture of fighting for one’s political party to a posture of listening. He added, “It’s when we get to the point of understanding, that’s when real change happens.” He also encouraged White believers to engage with the Black community, “You will find nothing but love from our culture as a whole. We love the idea that somebody wants to dive into our heart, into our pain, and understand our culture and the nuances that come along with us.” Jeremiah discussed how an

important element of discipleship in the Black church relates to helping “people of color heal from the racial trauma that they’ve been exposed to.” Such a holistic perspective on discipleship and personal transformation can be an example to the White church.

White engagement is important, but it also matters how they show up. Samuel, Brandon, and Gabriel encouraged White pastors to walk with Black pastors and bear some of the burden they carry. Samuel calls these pastors to inform their congregations of the experience of their Black and Brown brothers and sisters in Christ. Samuel and Gabriel described the burden that Black and Brown pastors feel when they are asked to share from their experiences, but then not see an ongoing plan of action implemented. Brandon calls for White pastors to be moral leaders who can reach their congregations in ways that a Black pastor cannot. He asserts, “What America needs are White moral leaders, someone to say... ‘People, we’ve absolutely betrayed democracy for the sake of short-term power.’” Several noted that it mattered when Whites protested alongside people of color this past year. Garon reflected, “What is inspiring is to see more people caring and more people reaching out and more people wanting to partner with other churches.”

According to these pastors, the killing of George Floyd revealed the ongoing challenge of systemic racism in a distinct way. On the one hand, several pastors noted that Floyd’s murder was not new to the Black community because they’ve seen it happen to Brianna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Trayvon Martin and countless others. Elijah reflected, “Racism has been so systemic for so long.” On the other hand, Darnell noted, “The Floyd case revealed to us the fear of those who are in control of systems.” He went on to discuss how grasping for power is the core issue and is fundamentally a “problem of the heart.” Jeremiah commented, “The reality is that a lot of Christians would much rather have people think that they’re okay and that they’re innocent rather than really wrestle with what part am I complicit in this and how does our collective complicity into this thing really take shape?” Yashawn suggested that there is a systemic ideological attack on the dignity of people of color that is grounded in faulty theology. Regarding police brutality, Brandon asserts, “White folks either want to believe it doesn’t happen or

it's just one apple, one bad apple. The hell it is. This is the way law enforcement treats Black folks from sea to shining sea." He continues, "Why are you so scared of us? That's four hundred and one years of racial encoding. That is a reflexive reaction of Whites when they see Black folks. It is implicit racism, the most difficult to get at, most difficult to resolve." George Floyd's murder gave us a glimpse into that problem.

Reflections on Interview Findings

While the Black pastors in this study included men and women from across the nation with diverse ages, denominational backgrounds, and political affiliations, they were unified in their call for US churches to engage issues of racial justice. While some segments of US evangelicalism might be tempted to minimize or dismiss race as a topic of religious concern, the Black pastors in this study call for clear and practical responses to racial injustice. Successfully leading congregations to address racial injustice means acknowledging and confronting political divisions in the church related to COVID-19 and social injustice. Pastoral leaders should caution their congregations about turning any social or political movement into a scapegoat or reason for not dealing with evils such as racial injustice. These Black pastors expressed frustration at political fracturing in the church and lamented the lingering lack of awareness regarding racial injustice. They remind leaders that growth in these areas requires a learning posture and commitment to enacting change. Several Black pastors called their White colleagues to help their congregations learn and then move beyond conversation to action. Leading in areas of justice and righteousness requires action. It also involves lamenting that progress toward racial reconciliation is lagging expectations given the long history of this work. As White researchers, the challenge to move from conversation to action is a key motivator for this publication. As stewards of the stories and lessons that were entrusted to us, we felt compelled to share them here and to find other venues to share these findings.

Theme Five: The Church's Role in Healing

Reporting of Interview Findings

One of the most prominent themes in this study with eighteen of nineteen pastors discussing it on sixty-four occasions was the church's role in healing. During this season of social unrest and COVID-19, these pastors believed that the church has an important though challenging role to play in the healing of individuals and communities. Caleb reminded that those within the church will have different opinions but engaging in truthful and open dialogue is essential. Amari commented:

I feel the tension of getting back together, but we also understand that we have already had a relationship. This is the body of Christ. We're going to work through this and continue to show the kingdom of God and share the light. But the hardest thing for me is, is to sit there and go, remove the mask. Stop faking it.

Anthony adds, "Going back to the Book of Acts, if my brother is in pain and doesn't have it, then I have to be in pain and don't have it." Angel commented on the important role that Black pastors play as "credible messengers" in their communities. Amari presented a vision to move from "racial reconciliation to racial restoration" and being a church that engages and builds up one's community. Garon called for the pursuit of holistic mission that addresses spiritual and physical needs.

Several pastors talked about the importance of addressing issues of social justice as a gospel calling. Malik suggested, "I believe that all of this has highlighted the central role of the church in addressing this. This is at the heart of the gospel and what the church has been made for." He continues, "The church is the answer for this very moment." Darnell emphasized the need to pray for national leaders and to speak against injustice. Zion added, "In dealing with injustices, the only way that we are able to address them appropriately... is to be centered on Christlike principles and not be Christian in name only. ...Christ principles change hearts."

Pastors also discussed what they perceived to be missed opportunities for the church to provide leadership. Elijah reflected on how the polarized responses of White and Black churches have sometimes been unhelpful. He questioned, “How do we get better at hearing one another?” He expressed concern that polarized responses might demonstrate the absence of a real church that has encountered the real love of Christ. Webster suggested that the watching world might be further ready to discredit the church because of the perceived gap between who we say we are and what they see in us.

Despite missed opportunities, pastors suggested that there is hope for the church to refocus and engage missionally. Yashawn recognized that evangelical theology has not typically dealt with systemic evil, but he suggests that Christ might be calling us to overcome that discomfort. He reflected, “My theology has come to the place of, we who are in the church, we have to be about addressing systemic issues and even looking at the teachings of Jesus and seeing where he was directly challenging systemic issues in his teaching.” Webster observed, “Jesus identifies with people with [their] backs against the wall.” He later added, “The community absolutely needs the church to be speaking into its pain, to call out the wrong that’s being perpetuated against the community.” Brianna encouraged:

I think that churches need to speak out. ... I think for too many years, the church has been silent. And because we have been silent, people are saying the church doesn't care. I'm telling you, people were blessed to see the pastors because, in the Black community, the church has a very powerful say. And people may say what they want, but in the Black community, when people are hurt, the first place they turn to is the church.

Garon suggested that the pandemic pushed leaders to question their ministry priorities and to focus on mission as it relates to people rather than simple activity. Amari reflected on the need to engage in deep relationship by asking, “How are you really doing?”

Then ask that question and really hear their heart. ...We need to exemplify more of what Jesus did to the woman at the well and go elsewhere, sit down, have a conversation.” Webster commented, “It has made me even more committed to this way of being the church, of being absolutely committed to the community that we’re placed in.” Makayla discussed her own sense of responsibility to engage in marches for social justice noting, “The Bible is clear that justice should prevail.” Brandon found hope in young leaders who are willing to put their faith into action.

Reflections on Interview Findings

Despite the hardship and disappointment expressed by these pastors, they expressed a clear conviction that the church has a key role to play in healing our communities. They described a corporate calling to serve one another and to suffer together. Several questioned the evangelical tendency to dichotomize social justice and the gospel. Instead, they find issues of justice and righteousness at the heart of what it means to live out one’s faith in this world. Leading congregations to take injustice seriously will involve calling each part of the church to suffer with and serve those parts that are facing injustice. It also means extending service beyond the church to care for one’s community in the hardships that they face. COVID-19 provided an opportunity for congregations to step up and serve their communities. Pastors must lead their congregations to pursue this work with integrity and authenticity because a skeptical world is watching. If they step forward as credible messengers, pastors and their congregations have an opportunity to spread hope. As researchers, we were challenged and inspired by the overwhelmingly positive and hopeful attitude of these pastors who were facing hardship beyond what we had initially imagined.

Practical Implications for Leadership

Considering the findings of this study, there are a number of practical implications for the leadership of Black pastors, White pastors, and academic leaders. These principles emerge from the unified voices of Black pastors representing diverse gender, age, regional, theological, and political perspectives. First, African

American leaders are encouraged to appreciate, cultivate, and grow in their sense of calling even when hardships emerge. The Black pastors in this study experienced a confirmed sense of calling and a clarification of that calling through this season of pandemic and social unrest. Similar to Lemke's study of midcareer missionaries, these pastors described hardship as an incubator for clarifying one's sense of calling.²⁰ While calling might play a role in the majority of those who pursue pastoral leadership, the breadth and depth of individual calling narratives in this study underscores the significant role that calling plays within the African American pastorate. A sense of calling serves as an anchor during times of crisis, but crises also have the potential to strengthen and clarify callings. Since the cultivation of callings is a lifelong process, African American leaders are encouraged to intentionally reflect upon their callings during times of unhindered ministry and times of hardship. There seems to be a depth of meaningfulness and power in the calling experiences of Black leaders that can be celebrated and cultivated.

A second leadership implication is that White leaders need to listen to, learn from, and walk with our Black brothers and sisters. The pastors in this study remind us that building bridges across racial divides is not a superficial endeavor. As a first step, leaders are encouraged to build authentic relationships with their African American brothers and sisters in Christ and listen openly to their experiences of racial injustice and leading during times of hardship. As a second step, White leaders are challenged to move from listening and learning to action. Authentic and courageous leadership confronts the labeling, deflecting, and scapegoating that is characteristic of political approaches to human problems such as racial injustice. White leaders need to recognize that deflecting focus from real human evils by focusing on depersonalized notions such as critical race theory or organizational movements such as Black Lives Matter is harmful to our brothers and sisters of color. While it may be appropriate to challenge theoretical constructs or organizational principles, the central concern here relates to unexamined motives and the temptation to deflect attention from

²⁰ Lemke, "Perceptions of Career Agency," 239.

real injustice. Leaders should challenge their congregations to avoid elevating the politics of this world over the politics of the kingdom of God.

In addition, White leaders and their congregations need to move from passive reception to active engagement. Swapping pulpits or inviting Black pastors to share about their experiences during times like the George Floyd murder is not enough. This sort of passivity might actually contribute to the problem of racial divisions in the church. Leaders of color can help guide us to appropriate action. Whether joining hands in worship, providing food to those who cannot access it, or marching together in protest, White leaders are called to learn and act. Both Black and White pastors have the opportunity to encourage one another and partner together. Acknowledging a mutual commitment to one's pastoral calling, the authority of God's word, and the healing role of the church in a broken world is an important step.

A final leadership implication is that faculty and academic leaders have an opportunity to demonstrate authentic leadership in our research, teaching, and advising. In our research and writing, Black leaders and White leaders have the opportunity to demonstrate active listening and reflective action by conducting research among diverse populations. Although we struggled as White researchers to examine our own motives and potential barriers to effectively researching Black experiences of racial trauma and quarantine, we discovered that it was possible for us to listen to, learn from, and respond to the experiences of our brothers and sisters of color. We were inspired to share the perspectives and convictions articulated by the pastors in our study. We learned that elevating their voices through extended presentation of findings and opening up about our struggles regarding whether and how to conduct this research is important. Perhaps engaging in and following through on this type of research can help contribute to lasting change.

In our teaching, academic leaders have the opportunity to help students examine the motives and perspectives of those engaged in public theology and discourse. As professors of future leaders, we have a responsibility to train up authentic leaders who are committed to theological integrity, the mission of the church, and

intercultural awareness. Future crises will require leaders who are committed to listening and action. In our advising and mentoring work, we can help students understand and cultivate their sense of calling even during times of hardship. Cultivating awareness and growth of callings can contribute to our students' overall motivation to learn and resilience during times of crisis such as this season of social unrest and COVID-19.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to listen to the personal and professional experiences of African American pastors during the COVID-19 pandemic and George Floyd protests, and to elicit principles for effective pastoral leadership and living out one's calling. Principles of practical theology and qualitative research were used to identify five main themes from interviews with nineteen pastors: (a) losses through hardship, (b) growth through hardship, (c) leading in hardship, (d) the need to engage racial justice, and (e) the church's role in healing. The findings paint a picture of loss and hardship, but they also point to leadership resilience and growth. Pastors challenge the church in North America to overcome political division by becoming a listening and learning community that demonstrates hope and healing. Through humble listening that seeks to understand and respond to the experiences and explanations of those around us, Christian leaders can honor one another as image bearers and demonstrate the kingdom of God to a watching world.