

# Churched and Unchurched Black Americans

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Three decades ago, E. Franklin Frazier (1963:85-86) predicted that the domination of the black church in the black community would decrease as blacks became "integrated into the institutions of the American community." In the ensuing thirty years the civil rights movement, court action, and federal legislation have, in fact, lowered barriers to education, jobs, and housing. Many members of the growing black middle class have migrated to the suburbs of the North and West (Roof and Spain, 1977:17). But despite the opportunity for upward mobility and integration, uncertain economic times and less government support minimized the breadth and endurance of such opportunities. According to the authors of *A Common Destiny* (Jaynes and Williams, eds., 1989:194-200), some blacks have reacted to both the opportunity and the uncertainty in their efforts to retain their cultural identity, and to pursue better housing, more education, and higher incomes. But others have had fewer opportunities and have been frustrated by low educational levels, poverty, and isolation within the inner cities.

This chapter will focus on recent and possible future changes in the church participation levels of black Americans, particularly in relation to social change in the black community. Frazier's thesis suggested the eventual abandonment of the black church by those who achieved integration into society's mainstream. Nelsen and Nelsen (1975:137) observed, however, that even "as conflict over basic values grew, the black church prospered" in the 1960s. Black cultural identity and its connection to the black church had remained important, irrespective of social-economic integration, so there was no reason to expect abandonment of the black church by the middle class. (See Roof and McKinney, 1987, on communal ties and sustaining beliefs.)

The black church had prospered in the South, in part because it has been the center of black community life, addressing multiple needs, not just religious concerns. The urban North, however, presented special challenges to the church; life-styles were more diverse and there was greater competition from other agencies and institutions relative to meeting community needs.

The central cities of the North, in particular, have experienced decline subsequent to Frazier's study. With increased joblessness in the inner city, upwardly mobile individuals have moved to the suburbs, resulting in social isolation for those left behind. The institutions (including churches) of the inner cities have lost the viable support they had when the community was more class-integrated (Wilson, 1987:56-57). Given the greater likelihood of middle- rather than lower-class people to participate in organizations, the decline in being churched should not be displayed by blacks in the suburbs, but rather, by the young and poorly educated in the cities of the North.

Our primary focus is the comparison of black church attendance rates across residential and regional contexts, with attention given to the differences in motivation for participation. Specifically, does the church still have strong communal ties or is it facing greater dependence upon the religious motivations of people? In the rural and urban South, blacks have been expected to belong to the church, and at least occasionally participate. In the urban North participation has been more voluntary, and more likely to be linked to the fulfillment of religious needs.

While Frazier's predictions that church participation would decline have not materialized, there are important differences in rates of participation by context, that is, by region and residence. Hard empirical data generally do not exist for carefully examining changes in black church participation since the 1950s and 1960s. We are fortunate, however, to now have two national Gallup samples—from 1978 and 1988—of unchurched and churched Americans, including significant subsamples of black Americans.<sup>1</sup> This allows us to look at change in black church participation over the last decade, and permits an in-depth analysis of motivations for participation across different regional and residential contexts.

In looking at the overall change in black church participation across the Gallup surveys, many will be delighted that the percentage of churched black Americans has increased from 57% to 62% over the decade. The less encouraging news is that this increase is due primarily to heightened rates among older, northern city blacks. The rates remain basically unchanged in other areas. Importantly, little has been done to correct the disproportionately great disaffiliation of young adult blacks in the northern cities, of whom about only one in three are churched.

Both past theoretical speculation and empirical data suggest that the black church is a diverse institution that has met and continues to meet different kinds of personal and community needs. This diversity is largely related to differences in the regional and residential locations of black churches. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990:15), for example, cogently argue that there can be no single view of the black church since it addresses various needs, issues, and social

conditions. Our task is to employ the Gallup surveys to examine the motivations people have for being churched, and how they might differ in different social contexts. Differences in motivation of black religious participation can be understood to represent a continuum from communal/involuntary on the one end, to voluntary/personal on the other. Movement toward the voluntary end should be evident as one moves from the South to the North.

### **Relationship Between the Black Church and Society: Differences by Context**

Historically, settings for the black church ranged from the rural South to nonsouthern urban centers. In the rural South, blacks had low educational levels, and church and religion could provide some escape from an oppressive society. In the southern city, the theodicy could shift somewhat to mastery of this world. The church in the nonsouthern city imperfectly met the needs of migrants who came from various types of church settings. (On the roles of black churches in Chicago from 1910–30, see Grossman, 1989.) In some settings and times, especially in the cities of the 1930s, some black churches withdrew from community involvement, and revivalistic, sectarian storefront churches prospered. (See Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990:209 who summarize this “deradicalization thesis.”)

But the contexts and the churches have changed. The civil rights movement demanded that churches in all settings address race issues. The rural church and the southern urban church have deep roots in the community, providing significant networks and resources for leadership. The black church in the nonsouthern city was not as successful at dominating the community or in attracting as high a proportion of residents for participation in either religious or extra-religious functions.

Lincoln and Mamiya (1988:364–65, also 1990) identify the rural church as the “historical and cultural reservoir of the ‘black folk’ religious experience.” Today this experience is affected by changes in occupational distribution, with many of the young leaving rural areas as small, individual farms decline in number. They also observe the growing class split in the black community. Those now in the middle class have experienced the benefits of civil rights politics, while those in the lower class continue to have needs that the rural church should meet.

In the inner cities of the North, in particular, conditions are not favorable for the church. Factories have closed in the central cities, and upwardly mobile residents have moved to the suburbs. Those left behind, subject to persistent poverty and sometimes identified as the “underclass,” have become increasingly isolated. The traditional institutions of help—schools,

churches, social agencies, police, and the ward and precinct political system—have been greatly weakened. (For the changing conditions of the Chicago inner city from the 1940s to the present, see Lemann, 1991.)

### **Participation: Communal Versus Voluntary Motivations**

Nelsen, Yokley, and Nelsen (1971:10) have noted how the entrenchment of the church in the black community can secure nearly involuntary membership. This is particularly evident in the rural South (Nelsen and Nelsen, 1975:61-62, 84). The migration to the northern cities meant greater choice among life-styles, as well as less social control by the churches. The northern, urban church became one institution among many, and increasingly focused on meeting religious needs, whereas the southern church traditionally performed economic, educational, and social functions, as well. Stump (1986:312) observed that church attendance depends more on strength of belief and less on a sense of social obligation in areas where denominational affiliation is diverse and rates of membership are low. Where there is greater cultural pressure to attend, a weaker association exists between personal religious orientation and participation. According to Stump (1987:145-46), "In the more secular North . . . many black social institutions rival the church in importance, and frequent attendance consequently tends to be limited to individuals possessing high levels of religiosity."

Analyzing data from 1978, Nelsen (1988:407) wrote that participation in the black church is more likely to occur for personal religious reasons in the metropolitan non-South than in the South. An important variable accounting for church membership and attendance in the non-South was the subjective importance of religion to the individual—Nelsen's best predictor of whether individuals were involved in the church. Only about half of the metropolitan residents in the non-South indicated that religion was very important to them, compared to three-fourths of their southern counterparts and about 85% of the nonmetropolitan Southerners. Since personal religiousness is especially important in the nonsouthern setting for church participation, and since religion is not very important to as many individuals there, we can understand the lower level of church participation.

In contrast, the southern socialization pattern, especially in rural areas, is to encourage, even demand, participation in the church. Individuals are churching as part of fitting into communal networks. Carmichael and Hamilton (1967:103) identified middle-aged women who were especially influential in the black community as "staunch church members." The civil rights movement drew upon this characteristic and, no doubt, further strengthened the power of the black church in the rural areas and cities of the South.

Participation in the black church in the South is related to the building and retention of community there; it is semi-involuntary. Involvement in the church in the urban North more directly reflects personal religious interest or expression; it is voluntary. Given the greater diversity of life-styles in the cities, the lower rates of personal religiousness in the North, and the historical pattern of the church dominating the community in the South, church participation on the part of blacks should be higher in the South than in the North.

The suburbanization of blacks in both the South and North introduces a new consideration for the black church.<sup>2</sup> In the North, suburbanization has occurred as an element of class mobility, with the central cities retaining especially lower-class, poorer, and isolated blacks. Hence, the participation rate ("churched") should be higher in the northern suburbs than in the northern central cities. A prediction about the southern suburban areas would be less certain because suburban residences around southern cities have generally included agricultural areas. Such areas have lower educational, occupational, and income levels on the part of blacks than is true for the cities, according to Roof and Spain (1977:15-17). Given the high churched rate expected for both the southern cities and the rural South, movement to the southern suburbs should lead to a lower rate of participation. While northern suburban areas should have lower rates than such areas in the South, these rates should still be higher than those of the northern central city. A higher degree of personal (or voluntary) reasons for participation should exist for the southern and northern suburbanites and the northern central city residents, while a more involuntary, or communal, basis for participation should exist for the rural and central city residents of the South.

Gender differences in rates of being churched should be tied to communal reasons for involvement, with women more likely than men to be churched. Hence, we would expect gender differences particularly in the nonmetropolitan areas and central cities of the South. Where the basis for participation is more voluntary we would also expect educational and age differences in rates of being churched. Especially important for voluntary participation would be personal religiousness.

Given our theorizing, we would rank the various region-residence areas according to their projected levels of church attendance in the following order from high to low: the rural South, the central cities of the South, the suburban South, the suburban North, and the central cities of the North. The rural South and central cities of the South have been identified as having a strong communal basis for participation (semi-involuntary), while the other three places of residence should be more associated with voluntary participation.

### Data and Definitions

Using face-to-face interviews, the Gallup Organization has now collected two sets of data on "unchurched" and "churched" Americans—in April 1978 and March 1988. We use the unweighted data sets in our analysis. In 1978 a second survey added additional unchurched Americans. Since the unchurched were not oversampled in 1988, our reanalysis of the 1978 data set—for comparisons with 1988—excludes the unchurched oversample of 1978. The 1988 data set oversampled blacks and Hispanics. We exclude the Hispanic oversample, but include the additional blacks who were interviewed.

To be "churched" means to be a member of a church and to have attended in the past six months, apart from weddings, funerals, or special holidays. Individuals without data for this measure were excluded from the study.

Our regional and residential categories for reporting the 1988 data will be the rural (nonmetropolitan) South, southern (central) cities, suburban South, suburban North, and northern (central) cities. We exclude the rural (nonmetropolitan) North because there are only fifteen blacks in the sample with that residence. When we use the term "North" or "northern" we are referring to non-South or nonsouthern.

**TABLE 15.1**  
**Demographic Differences in the Percentage of Churched**  
**Black Americans, 1978–1988**

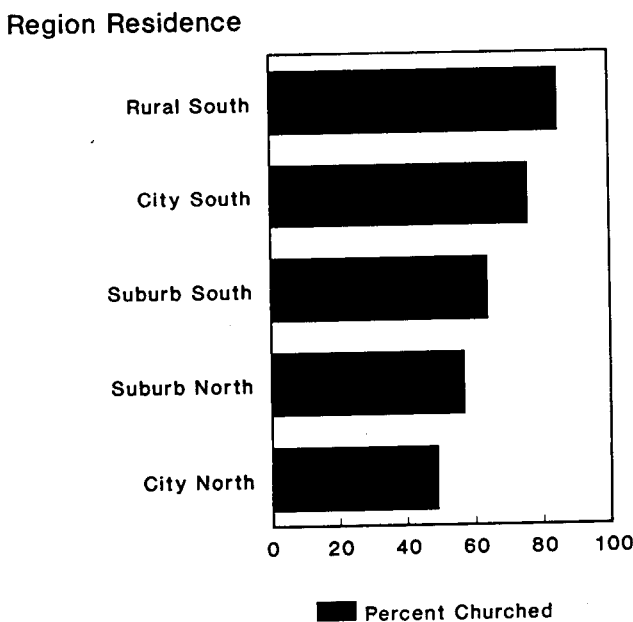
Demographic Categories	Year of Study	
	1978	1988
Total black American	57%	62%
Residence		
Metropolitan	46	59
Rural (nonmetropolitan)	91	81
Metropolitan by region		
North	40	51
South	60	70
Northern metropolitan by age		
Age 40 and older	43	63
Under 40	38	37

### Findings: Rates of Being Churched

As noted earlier, the percentage churched has increased from 1978 to 1988, and this increase is especially visible among urban blacks (suburban and central city) age forty and older (see Table 15.1). As drugs and drug-related crime increasingly trouble the inner city, it should not be surprising to find older blacks involved in churches for the comfort that can be found there (see Anderson, 1990).<sup>3</sup>

There are substantial differences in rates of being churched across the five regional-residential categories (see Figure 15.1). The highest rate of being churched in 1988 occurs in the rural South (85%), followed in order by the southern city (76%), the southern suburb (64%), the northern suburb (57%), and the northern city (49%). In examining the effects of different motivations for church participation, we will see in Table 15.2 that their strength varies with context. That is, the strength of any particular motivation's relationship to church participation will be different in different regional-residential categories—or, in statistical language, there is a significant interaction between motivation and context.

**FIGURE 15.1**  
**Percent Churched by Region-Residence**



Religious motivations should be significantly related to being churched in areas where church involvement is voluntary, that is, where individuals are churched for personal rather than communal reasons. In Nelsen's analysis of the 1978 data, "importance of religion" was the most powerful predictor of being churched, especially in the metropolitan non-South. For the 1988 analysis we are dividing the "metropolitan" category into suburb and city. We also have two different measures of religiosity: importance of religion and belief in life after death. Table 15.2 presents the percentages of churched across the five residential categories for each of our two religious motivation measures.

The table shows that importance of religion and belief in an afterlife are significantly related to being churched in the three regional-residential areas that depend on voluntary participation—the southern suburbs, the northern suburbs, and the northern cities. In these three contexts, religious motivations for church participation are strongly evident. In the other two locations—the rural South and the cities of the South—importance of religion and belief in an afterlife are not significantly related to being churched. In these two settings individuals participate less out of a personal religious orientation and more because being churched is expected—on a communal, or semi-voluntary basis.<sup>4</sup>

Consistent with the latter, Table 15.2 also shows that gender is significantly related to being churched in the rural South and in the cities of the South; women being more affected by the tug of communal ties toward church participation than men.

Table 15.2 also shows the differential effect on church participation across region-residence for education and age—both of which should show a more voluntary pattern if our thesis is correct. As shown in the table, high school graduates are more likely to be churched, but the power of the education variable (dichotomized in the table as high school graduate or not) is relatively low. An analysis not shown in the table (with education trichotomized—less than high school, high school diploma, and some college or more) and employing the five residential-regional categories and age, (dichotomized), produced a stronger effect for education ( $\beta = .18$ ). Without being controlled, age tends to suppress the impact of education on being churched (older blacks tend to have lower educational levels and are more likely to be churched). The percentages churched with education trichotomized are: less than high school, 50%; high school diploma, 67%; and some college or more, 71%.

Of all the blacks under forty years of age, 52% are churched, compared to 71% of those forty years and older. Looking at age differences within each place of residence, we find that significance is obtained only for the residents of the northern cities, although significance is approached in the northern suburbs as well.



**TABLE 15.2**

**Percent of Churched Black Americans in 1988 by Selected Religious and Demographic Predictors, Within Regional and Residential Categories**

Selected Predictor	South			North		Total	Eta/ Beta*	R*
	Rural	City	Suburb	Suburb	City			
Region/Residence**	84.6 (52)	76.4 (72)	63.8 (69)	57.4 (54)	48.7 (158)	61.9 (404)	-.27 -.21d	.46
Importance of Religion								
Less than very important	85.7 (7)	68.4 (19)	20.5 (15)	30.8 (13)	22.4 (67)	33.9 (121)		
Very important	84.4 (45)	79.2 (53)	75.9 (54)d	65.9 (41)a	67.8 (90)d	73.9 (283)	.38 .34d	.46
Believe in afterlife								
No/Undecided	77.8 (9)	64.7 (17)	47.8 (23)	35.5 (17)	27.6 (58)	41.1 (124)		
Yes	86.0 (43)	80.0 (55)	71.7 (46)a	67.7 (37)a	61.0 (100)d	71.2 (281)	.29 .25d	.38
Age								
Under 40	76.5 (17)	74.3 (35)	60.0 (40)	50.0 (24)	32.9 (76)	52.1 (192)		
40 and older	88.6 (35)	78.4 (37)	69.0 (29)	66.7 (27)	61.5 (78)d	70.9 (206)	.19 .18d	.35
Gender								
Men	75.9 (29)	64.1 (39)	65.6 (32)	53.8 (26)	42.5 (80)	56.3 (206)		
Women	95.7 (23)a	90.0 (33)b	62.2 (37)	60.7 (28)	55.1 (78)	67.8 (199)	.12 .13b	.32
Education								
Not high school graduate	82.8 (29)	70.0 (20)	55.6 (27)	50.0 (14)	41.2 (51)	57.4 (141)		
High school graduate	87.0 (23)	78.8 (52)	69.0 (42)	60.0 (40)	52.3 (107)	64.4 (264)	.07 .10a	.29

\*ANOVA and MCA were used to test the three-way relationship, including interactions, among churched, region-residence, and the selected religious and demographic, second predictors. Eta is for the relationship between the second predictor and being churched, *without* controlling for region-residence. Beta is for the relationship between the second predictor and being churched, controlling for region-residence. "R" reports the strength of the two predictors together. One-Way ANOVA was used to test the significance of differences in the percentage churched within each of the five regional-residential categories for each predictor.

\*\*Significant (c) interaction occurred between residence-region and importance of religion in predicting being churched; the Eta and Beta for region-residence and "R" are from that analysis.

Significance: (a)  $p < .05$ ; (b)  $p < .01$ ; (c)  $p < .02$ ; (d)  $p < .001$ .

Using the importance of religion, age, and education as predictors, we find that all three of these variables were significantly related to being churched in northern cities. Older blacks, those who report religion to be important to them, and the better educated are more likely to be churched. Each of these three predictors relates to voluntary participation, a characteristic of the suburban and northern experience.

Our two Gallup surveys included six statements about the church that neatly capture criticisms that blacks have made about the church over the years, for example, that "there's no real religion among the members" or that the "church places too much emphasis upon money" (see Drake and Cayton, 1944:418-19). The 1978 data on these statements were analyzed by Nelsen (1988). Not all of the statements, however, describe characteristics of the black church that further develop the distinction between communal and voluntary bases for church participation. One exception to this is the following statement: "Churches today have a clear sense of the real spiritual nature of religion." This statement measures the likelihood that an individual would participate in a church based on his or her perception of the religious or spiritual nature of the church. Overall, 53% were churched if they disagreed with the statement, and 69% were churched if they agreed with it (this difference remains significant when place of residence is controlled, as can be seen in Table 15.3). Of those who disagreed with the statement, about three-fourths of the rural and central city southerners were churched compared to less than half of suburbanites and those residing in the central cities of the North. But in the northern cities the most significant differences exist in the

**TABLE 15.3**  
**Percent of Churched Black Americans by Response to:**  
**"Churches Have a Clear Sense of the Real Spiritual Nature of**  
**Religion," Within Regional and Residential Categories**

	South			North		Total	Eta/ Beta*	R*
	Rural	City	Suburb	Suburb	City			
Disagree/ Undecided	78.9 (19)	73.9 (23)	57.7 (26)	57.1 (28)	36.4 (77)	52.6 (173)		
Agree	87.9 (33)	77.6 (49)	67.4 (43)	57.7 (26)	60.5 (81) <sup>a</sup>	69.0 (232)	.13**	.32

\*See Table 15.2 note for an explanation of eta, beta, and R. Agreement or disagreement was one predictor, and region-residence the second predictor. Significant interaction was not present for these two variables in predicting the rate of being churched.

\*\*Significant @  $p < .01$ .

rates of being churched by view of the statement: 36% of those not identifying churches as especially religious were churched, compared to the 61% being churched of those believing that churches have a clear sense of what is religious.

### Future Needs and Dreams

It has been observed that regional contrasts persist in black religion even though conditions associated with escapist, otherworldly religion have declined overall (Nelsen, 1988; see also Stump, 1987:150-51). One explanation examines "important adaptive changes" that have taken place in the black church (Glenn and Gotard, 1977; see also Lincoln, 1974; Ellison and Sherkat, 1990:553). Furthermore, black churches in different regions have adapted differently in response to their region's unique changes. Secularization theory, as it addresses the differentiation of the black church and religion vis-à-vis other institutions, proposes that individuals increasingly participate in organized religion because of religious commitment, rather than out of communal pressures or because of nonreligious functions performed by religious institutions.

With increased levels of education, religion would not thrive as an escapist orientation but, rather, as one that affirms experiences in the here-and-now. (See Mukenge, 1983:204, on the role of the church in "maintaining mental health and psychological stability.") Some individuals would find special meaning conveyed by churches, while others would not. Religious participation is now more a matter of personal choice, particularly in the suburban areas and the northern cities.

The secularization and differentiation of the black church (with membership increasingly related to religious commitment), seems to occur in an ever-evolving fashion. Nevertheless, the black church meets various needs in diverse settings. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990:11) point out that "black churches are institutions that are involved in a constant series of dialectical tensions." As black Americans adjust to changes, including reversals, in economic prosperity and access to mainstream America, the black church offers differing expressions of needs and dreams.

The 1988 data set allowed us to examine differences within the metropolitan areas, between suburbs and central cities. There are similarities between these two places of residence in the non-South, with importance of religion and belief in an afterlife the best predictors of being churched. These are not significantly related to being churched in the rural South or in the cities of the South. An especially interesting aspect of the 1988 data set is the similarity between the suburban South and the North in terms of patterns that pre-

dicit being churched. Furthermore, the percentage churched in the suburban South more closely resembles that in the suburban North than in the southern cities.

Even though blacks in the rural South or the central cities of the South are more likely to indicate that religion is very important to them, to believe in an afterlife, and to be churched; being churched is not related to personal religiousness in these regions. This is not because otherwise religiously oriented persons in the rural and urban South are not churched, but rather because in these areas otherwise nonreligiously oriented persons are also churched. We characterize religious participation in these locales as being communal—blacks are expected to participate and they do (particularly women). In the other three locations—the two suburban areas and the central cities of the North—participation is more voluntary and is related to the personal religiousness of the individuals.

Considerable literature documents the finding that younger Americans are less likely to be involved in churches (Hoge and Roozen, 1979). For blacks in 1988, one-half of those under forty years of age were churched, compared to seven-tenths of those forty years and older. In each of the five residential categories, when age is related to being churched there is a dramatic decline in the percentage of those under forty years old being churched (see Table 2). Three-fourths of the rural Southerners and those of the central cities in the South under forty are churched, but only one-third of those in the central cities of the North are so. While the data are not shown here, younger blacks with lower educational levels in Northern cities display particularly low rates.

Lincoln and Mamiya (1990:397) call attention to “the growing class divide between the coping sector of middle income blacks and the working poor, and the crisis sector of the dependent poor,” noting that this is a major challenge facing the black church. In their word, a “reconnection” must occur between the black church and the urban black poor, given the increased isolation that characterizes the residents of the inner cities. The growing problems of the inner city suggest that the unchurched young adults of today will not easily become churched tomorrow, despite a considerable increase in the rate of being churched from 1978 to 1988 for blacks forty years and older in the cities of the North.

In the rural South and in the cities of the South, participation will remain high as church and black community remain firmly intertwined. Future participation trends in these areas, therefore, will be driven largely by demographics—more specifically, general population growth or decline. Future rates in the suburbs are difficult to predict because the driving force in these areas will be the local black churches. Attendance will depend on the ability or willingness of the local church to link its religious message to issues of

meaning associated with new social status, and a continued search for a black identity within this new status.

The situation in the northern cities is not encouraging. Participation among older adults should remain relatively high as increasingly marginalized blacks continue to remember the church, and turn to it for traditional piety and refuge. But the future of the black church in the city is really dependent in the long term on the black church's ability to involve the less educated, younger adults who currently have little predisposition—and possibly even disdain—for the church. This is perhaps the greatest and least understood challenge for the black church. Whether the established churches in the central cities—many with members who commute from their new residences in the suburbs—can be successful on a large scale remains to be seen. Their success will depend on programs designed to reach youths in the inner cities, to encourage their education, to mentor, and to be a bridge for their eventual church participation. The racial crisis that erupted in Los Angeles in 1992 has spurred middle-class blacks to reconsider their commitments (or the lack of these) to the poor of the inner city, and discussion has emerged about the need to reinvest there. It might be hoped that the black churches of the middle class will lead the initiative to provide resources and leadership for such a development. It is also possible that inroads into the inner city might be made by streetwise evangelists. Strenuous efforts by both types of religious organizations would testify to the diversity of mission and functions of the black church.