LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF HOW ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT IN

BLACK GREEK LETTER SORORITIES INFLUENCES CHRISTIAN MEMBERS'

SPIRITUAL GROWTH

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Lorraine Mary Juliana Aragón

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA
2023

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored how being part of a Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO) sorority impacts the spiritual growth of its Christian members. One of the issues explored was the influence relationships within these sororities have on members striving to be like Christ. There is a dichotomy of perspectives regarding Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs). They have a significant role in the Black community as organizations that foster leadership, philanthropy, and sisterhood and promote education. They are admired on and off college campuses and in the broader community in graduate chapters. The objective of phenomenology is to describe phenomena of spiritual growth among Christian sorority members from the life experiences of those who live them; that premise guided the interviews conducted for this study. The results found that active engagement in a BGLO sorority positively impacts its members' spiritual growth. From the emotional stories of sisterhood, service, and devotion to prayer, their experiences evidenced strengthened walks of faith. This study contrasts the Anti-BGLO narrative as a testament to these organizations' legacy and practices deeply grounded in the church.

Keywords: Black sororities, Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO), denouncing Greek letters, divine nine, spiritual growth, Christian faith practices.

Dedication

This study is dedicated to the woman who led me to Christ through the example of her faith, her discipline in prayer, her loving compassion, and her dedication to the word of God in all aspects of her life. I met Jesus through your words of wisdom, your formidable strength, and the love that emanated from you—to my mother *Cherry Elfreda Goulbourne- James,* who once told me I was a fighter and I thought… just like you until I will see you again! Love Lur.

Acknowledgments

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me-Phil.4:13.

I am giving all Glory to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! There is no testimony without a test. During this dissertation journey, I was hospitalized nine times; three amputation operations, three battles with Sepsis, twice fighting for my life in the ICU, one complication from my kidney transplant, and finally, Covid 19. Ironically, when I applied to Liberty, my letter of intent declared that my most outstanding attribute was tenacity. I typed some of this work from the hospital bed with the nurses laughing at my staying up late into the night to avoid missing an assignment deadline or while I sat for hours being infused with antibiotics. I share this to say, be encouraged! When we are transparent, we help others to know they are not alone, and God is no respecter of persons; he did this for me, and he will surely be there for you! I thank my professors, whose prayers and encouragement were rays of hope, but special thanks to my family. ¡A Jesús, mi Señor y Salvador! Mi Esposo, Joel- mi media naranja, el milagro de mi vida y lugar seguro. Mis hermanos, especialmente Peter, el protector y animador, mi hermano Tony, la fuerza tranquilizadora. Las dos razones para que Jerrell y Autumn sigan siendo una fuente constante de alegría y orgullo. En este mundo la familia lo es todo. ¡Mi gente y raza la fuerza de la fe de nuestros antepasados representada en nuestro orgullo estaban sin una voz déjenos ser sus voces! * To Jesus, my Lord and Savior! My husband, Joel-my soulmate, is the miracle of my life and a safe place. To my brothers, especially Peter, the protector and cheerleader, and my brother Tony, the calming force. My two reasons for carrying on—Jerrell and Autumn; they are a constant source of joy and pride. In this world, family is everything. Our ancestors' strength was their faith; my people and race represent our pride. They were without a voice. Let us be their voices!

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List of Abbreviations

Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA)

Sigma Gamma Rho (ΣΓΡ)

Zeta Phi Beta (ΖΦΒ)

Black Feminist Thought (BFT)

Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO)

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

Predominantly White Institutions (PWI)

Membership Intake Process (MIP)

CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN

Introduction

Maya Angelou once stated, "A sorority is learning about people, a sorority is giving without expecting a return. A sorority is earning respect from others, as well as for yourself " (Kidadl Team, 2021, para. 7). Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO) sorority members form a unique community. This phenomenological study explored how active engagement with other Christians in a non-religious BGLO sorority impacts one's spiritual growth as Christians. These organizations (sororities) are a part of "the Divine Nine," a nine-member Pan-Hellenic Council comprising five fraternities and four sororities that collectively strive to positively impact the Black community. BGLOs' existence has profound significance in the Black community as institutions that foster fictive kinship, leadership, philanthropy, and education (Mitchell, 2012). Other community institutions such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and BGLOs have their roots in the church, serving as the community's cornerstone. These institutions provide a network of support that has helped Black people navigate racism, fighting against what Smith (1999) calls radical evil. Radical evil refers to cruelty concentrated disproportionately on specific groups, resulting in long-term, transgenerational suffering, a description of the racism (Smith, 1999).

The church as a community cornerstone and a source of support has instilled a strong reliance on faith that is evident among BGLO membership. A doctoral and empirical analysis of BGLO members conducted by Clarke and Brown (2011) revealed that 79% reported having had a "born again" experience, 88% declared that their religious beliefs lie behind their whole approach to life, 93.8% reported that they experience the presence of God in their lives, and 85.9% carry their religious beliefs over into other dealings in life. While being rooted in the

church, BGLOs face criticism in the community. Many within the broader community of believers, both members and non-members of BGLO sororities, question whether the actions of some sorority members reflect Christian values. Additionally, others struggle with whether their allegiances to these organizations are contrary to biblical statutes that admonish believers about taking oaths or being unequally yoked. Those Anti-BGLO critics argue for the renunciation of BGLO membership citing the biblical scripture Matthew 5:34-37 that admonish believers against taking oaths lightly, questioning that the oaths of allegiance taken during induction stand in defiance of this admontion. Others denounce BGLO membership because of these organizations' status as secular, citing 2 Corinthians 6:12 that warns believers against being unequally yoked with unbelievers (John, 2019).

Considering the African American community's deep ties in the church, these concerns place BGLOs under increasing scrutiny (Chambers, 2019). At the center of the anti-BGLO argument is a fundamental question of whether the tenets and practices of Greek life[1], while not specifically Christian, are therefore contrary to believers' spiritual growth. BGLOs are secular organizations. Not all members identify as Christian, nor are there requirements to be believers, although Christian tenets influenced their founders and guiding principles. Incidents of hazing,

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[1] Greek life is described as fraternities and sororities sharing these common elements: secrecy, selection of new members on the basis of a two-part vetting and probationary process known as rushing and pledging, and a set of complex identification symbols that may include Greek letters, armorial achievements, ciphers, badges, grips, hand signs, passwords, flowers, and colors. Fraternities and sororities engage in philanthropic activities, host parties, provide "finishing" training for new members, such as instruction on etiquette, and create networking opportunities and close friendship bonds (Whipple & Sullivan, 1998, pp.7-17).

the secrecy shrouding the initiation processes, and oaths are parts of Greek life that concern many Christian members and non-members, leaving some feeling conflicted about membership. Regarding the scope of this study, the focus was solely on sorority members that are openly professing, born-again, spirit-filled Christians and actively engaged members in the four Divine Nine sororities. This inquiry explored if spiritual growth occurs among BGLO Christian sorority members who engage in corporate activities.

Scripture reveals the divine will of God concerning believers' spiritual growth— "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" (*New King James Version*, 1982/2021, 2 Cor. 3:18). Therefore, the clear objective of spiritual growth is transformation into the *imago Dei* by the work of the Holy Spirit along with spiritual disciplines practiced individually and in the context of an authentic Christian community, including studying scripture, prayer, worship, and fellowship (Pettit, 2008).

According to Clarke and Brown (2011) in an analysis of BGLO members, 93% identified themselves as Christians. One of the studies by Pew Research indicates that Black women also stand out for their high level of religious commitment (Pew Research Center, 2009). More than 80% of Black women say religion is important to them, and roughly 60% say they attend religious services weekly. These percentages indicate that no other group of men or women from any racial or ethnic demographic exhibits comparably higher religious observance (Pew Research Center, 2009). Although religious observance alone does not necessarily ensure that one is born-again or a spirit-filled believer in Christ, these percentages serve as an indicator that Black women are a well-positioned demographic to evaluate and assess their lived experiences of spiritual growth.

Spiritual formation is the process of growth, often referred to as sanctification in theological texts. The disciplines and practices learned through faith communities are some of the building blocks of the transformative process that is spiritual formation. At this point in our discussion, it is essential to note that using interchangeable terms is a prime example of how many diverse concepts and descriptors can be ambiguous, complicating the discussion. Consequently, we begin our discussion by defining terms (Payne, 2020). The following section will begin with a relatively broad overview of spiritual growth in the community context. This overview will include perspectives on Black Spirituality and the role of fictive kinship in spiritual formation among Black women who are members of BGLOs (Smith, 1999; Smith, 1976).

Background to the Problem

To examine the topic of spiritual growth, particularly within the context of a communities like those formed within a sorority, this researcher looked at spiritual formation as an outcome of a comprehensive, transformative Christian spiritual growth process. However, the literature interchange terms like spirituality, spiritual formation, and spiritual growth requiring the reader to remain cognizant of context to determine usage. Therefore, for our purposes spiritual formation should be understood according to Smith III and Zondervan (2011):

> Spiritual formation is a more refined term connoting a particular dynamic within Christian spirituality. Jeffrey Greenman has noted that it involves, "our continuing response to the reality of God's grace shaping us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit, in the community of faith for the sake of others (p. 546).

The formation is constantly progressive and reciprocal, whether aligning one with the character and image of Christ or negatively deforming in ways that are at odds with the gospel. The pertinent question is not whether one is forming but how and in what direction (Smith III &

Zondervan, 2011). The focus of this study is exploring the directional influence of active engagement in BGLO sororities on their Christian members. Spiritual formation toward Christlikeness is the outcome of reciprocal, directionally progressive, and developmental spiritual growth in and through the community.

Spiritual Growth

The distinguishing and foundational characteristic of Christian spiritual growth is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit through salvation and submission at work in the believer's transformative process of spiritual formation. The Holy Spirit's presence shifts formation from solely human effort to the work of the divine. In an exegesis of God's cosmic ecology, Lowe and Lowe (2018) reference Edward Wimberley, who proposes imagining the universe,

> As a "nested ecology" consisting of an interlocking set of systems that begin at the level of the self and progressively extend to encompass families, groups, communities, ecosystems, the biosphere, and beyond into the unfathomable reaches of the cosmos (p. 13).

For the purposes of this discussion spiritual growth should be understood as being like physical growth, the result of both internal dynamics and external forces toward maturation. Consequently, Christians must be intentionally conscious of the forces influencing their lives and pursue beneficial spiritual growth (Smith III & Zondervan, 2011). The imagery of a universe that is both formatively developing while progressively expanding and reciprocally interconnected is a powerful illustration of the divine nature of a Triune God who has formed us in his image. Accordingly, spiritual growth is a collaborative endeavor between the creator and his creation (Pettit, 2008).

As BGLO sororities have no religious affiliation, the study is grappling with the paradigm of Christian spiritual experiences in technically secular settings, environments not

specifically dedicated to spiritual growth. Nevertheless, believers exist in physical bodies interacting with the secular world around them and within the body of Christ, inclusive of language, culture, racial identity, and gender. Therefore, it is reasonable to consider that these external factors would distinctively impact a believer's experience of spiritual formation like that described in the literature on Black Spirituality. If a believer's whole environment impacts spiritual growth and development, we must consider the unique factors that have specifically impacted Black women, the target group for this study.

Black Spirituality

What exactly is meant by the concept of Black Spirituality? As noted by Adams (2019),

> Theologian Barbara A. Holmes suggests "Black spirituality is characterized by its theological diversity and a broad spectrum of cultural nuances." Moreover, Holmes views the work of the Spirit as an integral part of Black religious discourses on spirituality, holiness, worship, scriptural interpretation, and social activism (para. 14).

Enslavers utilized Christianity as a means for the acculturation of enslaved Africans in a concerted effort to eradicate all forms of African culture and to prevent potential collusion among and rebellion by the enslaved people. Despite aggressive attempts to extinguish all elements of African cultural traditions from the consciousness of enslaved Africans, African folklore, dance, music, art, culture, and religious beliefs transplanted into the New World. While religiosity and spirituality are related, prior research has shown that Black women perceive them to be distinct concepts (Mattis, 2000). Several studies have suggested that religion plays a critical role in Black women's mental health aiding their ability to cope with personal and societal stressors. However, a new study indicates that spirituality, rather than religiosity, may be the element that is essential to Black women. According to Taylor et al., (2009),

Afrocentric scholarship in Black psychology (Brome, et al., 2000; Jagers & Smith, 1996)

identifies core elements of African American worship modalities and spiritual orientations as

being products of a distinctive African cultural perspective. Spirituality is a central organizing

framework and an essential characteristic of this African-centered worldview that shapes both

the individual and communal consciousness of persons of African descent (Brome et al., 2000;

Jagers & Smith, 1996; Maynard-Reid, 2000). (para. 4)

The African diaspora sustained remnants of their Afrocentrism[2] albeit with modifications

reflecting cultural, spiritual, and socio-economic influences of their new environment (Appiah,

2019). The result is an understanding of Black Christian spirituality defined through Afro-

diasporic experience, forged in adversity, and deeply rooted in African-centered communal

identity and the survival of enslaved Africans.[3]

Black Women as the Church

Examining the church as a cultural institution within Black communities, Historian Henry

Louis Gates Jr., in a documentary based on a book series, explains how the Black Church has

played a vital role in Black liberation. Gates notes that the backbone of the church has been

Black women from the beginning. According to Reed and Neville (2013), at the individual level,

Black women's spirituality often serves as a coping resource for various life stressors, including

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[2] The Afrocentric experience is a culturally grounded social work practice-based model that affirms, codifies, and integrates common cultural experiences, values, and interpretations that cut across people of African descent (Whitney M. Young Jr. School of Social Work, n.d.).

[3] In the research literature, the terms "African," "Negro," "Black," "Afro-American," "African American," "colored," "freedmen or free Africans," and "enslaved Africans," may be used interchangeably from study to study and within the same study. A fuller understanding is usually derived from context.

issues of discrimination and racism (Mattis, 2002; Taylor et al., 2004). Black women gather to share their experiences of gender-related adversity, organize around the issues, and advocate for change both inside and outside the church (Higginbotham, 2018; Mattis, 2002). Thus, Black women's social and political life is intricately interwoven with spirituality at both the community and individual levels. The emphasis on community motivated the formation of BGLO sororities, primarily on the campuses of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The origins of both institutions stem from the Black church that influenced these organizations' founders. Our discussion must consider the interconnected relationship and the outside forces that impact Christian Black women's spiritual growth and formation. Although not all BGLOs are founded at HBCUs, their ties to the Black church are consistent despite being founded at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) because they also serve as social support. Therefore, their interconnectedness with activism, advocacy, and racial uplift through supportive social networks, and higher education as levers of uplifting community aligning with aspects of Black spirituality.

Introduction to Origins of HBCUs and BGLOs

This segment examines the impetus of Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) as well as BGLOs which were formed partly in response to the oppressive systemic racism[4] found in some institutions of higher learning (Dubois, 1930). These institutions have transformed from being merely alternatives to their White counterparts to becoming pillars in the Black community. Discussion of one institution will inevitably incorporate the other. Segregated

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[4] As noted by (Harmon et al., 2020, Institutional racism, also known as systemic racism, is a form of racism that is embedded in the laws and regulations of a society or an organization. It manifests as discrimination in areas such as criminal justice, employment, housing, health care, education, and political representation.

society perpetuates many mental, physical, and economic ills upon Black communities. Yet unintentionally, segregation encouraged a strong communal mutuality for survival, fostering fictive kinships that still are present during the post-Jim Crow segregation era. New opportunities in higher education meant a Black intelligentsia of economic and social affluence within Black communities. Dubois coined the term, "the talented tenth" whom he tasked with leadership responsibilities in the Black community (Dubois, 1903). While that talented tenth represented hope and even possibility, it also became the focus of negativity considering the concerns about some BGLOs.

The Social and Historical Contexts of BGLO Origins

On December 30, 1856, two years after its founding, Ashmun Institute was renamed Lincoln University. It became the first HBCU dedicated by minister John Miller Dickey who penned, "Hope and fear struggled in each breast as they contemplated the future of the first American college looking to the education of a people 'despised and rejected'" (as cited in Hawkins, 2012, para. 4). Dickey spoke of the formidable and lofty aspirations of Historically Black Colleges and Universities as leaps of faith. In the shadow of slavery and the suppression of the Black Codes[5], educating Black people was a matter of battling systemic oppression, even a violation of the law. In many southern states, the ramifications were severe; for example, this Act, passed by the General Assembly of the State of North Carolina in 1830–1831, states:

> A White man or woman, be fined not less than one hundred dollars, nor more than two hundred dollars, or imprisoned; and if a free person of color, shall be fined, imprisoned, or whipped, at the discretion of the court, not exceeding thirty-nine lashes, nor less than

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[5] Various racially discriminatory laws that were passed in 1865 and 1866 in states that had been part of the Confederate States of America and that were enacted in order to maintain white supremacy after the formal abolition of slavery at the end of the American Civil War.

twenty lashes. *Be it further enacted that* if any slave hereafter teaches, or attempts to teach, any other slave to read or write, the use of figures excepted, he or she may be carried before any justice of the peace, and on conviction thereof, shall be sentenced to receive thirty-nine lashes on his or her bareback. (General Assembly of the State of North Carolina, 1831)

The few occasions that Christian slave masters would indulge such a dangerous venture was to encourage selective biblical understanding, albeit often with self-serving intentions. Consequently, ingrained in the social psyche of many Blacks is a dual veneration of faith and education as a means of elevation toward freedom. Harris and Sewell (2012) noted,

The early Black church not only served as a place for communal worship among free and enslaved Blacks; it also produced numerous sub-institutions (e.g., mutual, and benevolent societies, as well as educational facilities) that were effective in the liberation of Blacks. (p. 62)

The advent of HBCUs and BGLOs is both self-empowering and reactionary. According to DuBois (1930),[6] "Negro Greek letter societies arose as a result of the refusal of White Greek letter societies to admit colored people" (p. 12). According to Alpha Phi Alpha's official website, the fraternity initially served as a study and support group for minority students who faced racial prejudice, both educationally and socially, at Cornell (Perez, 2017). Founded in 1906, Alpha Phi Alpha is recognized as the first BGLO fraternity because they successfully maintained membership and expanded.

As noted by Harris and Sewell (2012), "Like most American institutions, Black Greek-Letter Organizations (BGLOs) did not come into existence in a vacuum" (p. 63). Black institutions of education, leadership, philanthropy, and culture were born of necessity. According to Hawkins (2012), "After the Civil War in 1866, the United Methodist Church collaborated with

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[6] There were a few attempts at creating intercollegiate BGLOs, with Alpha Kappa Nu beginning in 1903. The organization unfortunately disbanded due to a struggle with maintaining membership.

the Freedman's Aid Society, establishing schools, having 70 schools by 1882" (para. 7). As more

HBCUs were established, more BGLOs were founded until there was a necessity for a governing

body. Established in 1930, the Pan Hellenic Council provides governance to the nine BGLOs

also known as the Divine Nine. Seven Divine Nine organizations were founded at HBCUs, five

on the campus of Howard University, which was initially a theological seminary. Gasman

(2013), on the changing demographics of HBCUs, states that "HBCU founders were primarily

abolitionist missionaries, northern philanthropists, and the African Methodist Episcopal Church

who wanted to Christianize freed Blacks and train them for industrial enterprises" (p. 5).

The Talented Tenth

In September 1903, scholar W.E.B. Dubois set forth the theory of "the talented tenth" in

an influential essay, widely published, *To Address the Negro Problem*. According to Dubois

(1903), "The Negro race like all races is going to be saved by its exceptional men" (p. 33). This

notion influenced the BGLOs' acceptance of the mantle of leadership and accountability for the

practical ministry of uplifting their community. Dubois clarified that education and work are

levers for uplift and that only through our own trained Negro leaders can this be obtained.

Dubois (1903) stated, "The talented tenth of the Negro race must be made leaders of thought and

missionaries of culture among their people" (p. 75). The legacy of excellence that has emerged

from the ranks of BGLOs is extensive in every arena of life and represented by leaders from Dr.

Martin Luther King Jr. and Vice President Kamala Harris to W.E.B. Dubois and Thurgood

Marshall, from Oprah Winfrey and Tyler Perry to Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison, and from

Gladys Knight and Alicia Keyes to Michael Jordan and Ryan Howard (Leo, 2014). Admittance

into most BGLOs requires high scholasticism, a rigorous application and interview process, and

a record of community service. Gaining membership is intense. These high standards reflect

attributes associated with the Talented Tenth described by DuBois. BGLO members' familial

leadership model is influenced by spirituality practices formed in the Black church. One of the

influences that pervades the Black churches, HBCUs, and BGLOs is the dynamic of fictive

kinship in each of these institutions, in a setting where familial language and relationships are

customary practice. Black women regularly refer to and rely on their church families, form Sister

circles, have big brothers or sisters, and even play cousins during their HBCU experiences.

Cultural Dynamic of Fictive Kinship

Fictive kin relationships are those involving individuals who are not biologically related

but who describe each other as relatives (Chatters et al., 1994; Stewart, 2008). Developing strong

non-kin relationships is an essential cultural strength in African American communities (Collins,

1998), as is their collectivist nature. Traditionally, family and kinship have extended beyond the

immediate or biological relationships for African Americans (Stewart, 2008). Family scholars

often refer to these non-kin relationships as fictive kin (Allen et al., 2011; Chatters et al., 1994)

Concerning fictive kinship among BGLO members, Debose (2018) notes that:

> To fully understand the essence of the Divine Nine, it is first necessary to understand how
> Black culture intertwined with BGLOs. The foundation of these groups is reactive to the
> injustices occurring in society and on college campuses everywhere, which, to this day,
> impacts their purpose and function. Fictive kin relationships are the norm in Black
> culture. (p. 11)

A recurrent pattern across studies of fictive kinship social networks among Black women

reveals a need to develop interventions that address societal factors impacting their lives (Cook,

2015). The research establishes the importance of having support from other Black women like

that experienced by members of BGLO sororities through their fictive kin sisterly relationships.

Other fictive kin relationship examples include forming Sister circles as support groups that

build upon existing friendships and fictive kin social networks such as 100 Black men or Links,

which build a sense of community. These patterns have scriptural precedence. Paul wrote that we have been "adopted into God's family" (*New King James Version,*1982/2021, Eph. 1:5). Paul refers to Timothy as his "true child in the faith" (*New King James Version,*1982/2021, 1 Tim. 1:2); it is not simply a ceremonial label but refers to our bond in Christ Jesus. The title "brothers and sisters in Christ" (*New King James Version,*1982/2021, Col. 1:2) is not an abstract comparison to a different concrete reality. Paul speaks to a unified body in Christ bound by their shared faith and identity in Jesus. The Church is the family of God (*New King James Version,*1982/2021, 1 John 3:2), and our earthly relationships should reflect this spiritual truth.

Restorative Holistic Spiritual Formation is Unifying

The Holy Spirit assists in the transformation from brokenness to wholeness. God's divine will of reconciliation and restoration of a broken people is accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The objective of that restoration process is a unified body of believers as we seek to grow in Christ with one another. Although the body is comprised of multiple members, each with its purpose and perspective, only in unity can the body function, which is the outcome of a believer's growth (New King James Version,1982/2021, Eph. 4:4-6) truly reflecting the triune *imago Dei*. The imagery of a body composed of many members united in one body perfectly illustrates how Christians grow spirituality within various communities of faith and the greater society.

African Americans' historical experiences have shaped their spiritual formation, influenced by Afro-diasporic traditions, the atrocity of enslavement, and the precipitating systemic racial oppression, which makes Black Spirituality distinctive.

Adams (2019) remarked that,

Black Spirituality is concerned with more than just the spiritual condition of Black people, spirituality should be defined in a holistic way. The Black community's spiritual condition and cultural identity are ensconced in their social, political, and economic misfortunes and perseverance. Black Spirituality takes seriously the myriad oppressions that have been experienced by Black people since arriving on American soil some 400 years ago. When done correctly, Black Spirituality leads the Black Church beyond the building experience, or that which they encounter within the formal church space, and out into the public square of their various communities. (p.1)

The admonition to go beyond the four walls of the church building brings this study's discussion back to examining spiritual growth as the result of engagement in the public square of our communities. Like the engagement central to active engagement in BGLO sororities.

Statement of the Problem

This study sought to examine how active engagement with other Christians in BGLO sororities influenced Christian members' spiritual growth. There is a void in the literature concerning Black Christians' experiences of spiritual growth and formation while recognizing the dynamics of Black Spirituality on Black women. There appears to be a particular emphasis in the literature that focuses on spiritual growth within the context of solely traditional recognized communities of faith versus more broadly connecting spiritual growth with the reciprocal ecological paradigm of spiritual formation noted by Lowe and Lowe (2018).

Studies that thoughtfully incorporate theoretical approaches like Black Feminist thought or Black Spirituality acknowledge the historical and social influences of marginalization or intersectionality on Black women and provide a more well-rounded picture. Appiah (2019) notes that:

During her research she discovered there was comparatively little attention given to spiritual formation and contemplative spiritual disciplines in African American literature or specifically addressing the Black context. In comparison to the literature from the perspective of a white, European-American point of view which has been primarily embraced by white audiences. (p. 2)

Black women's unique experiences are seldom recognized as a particular social-cultural entity and consequently, seldom receive scholarly consideration. This invisibility, however, means the opportunities for innovative research are infinite. Since there are no experts on Black women's lives (except those that live them), there is tremendous freedom to develop new ideas and uncover new facts (Smith, 1976). Cannon (as cited in Gushee, 2019) makes the connection between Black Feminist Thought and womanism as a paradigm for studying Black women and the role this plays in groups like BGLOs. She notes,

> The neglected history of Black women in the United States, periodizing that history, and clarifying that the situation of oppression faced by Black women fundamentally alters the context within which they have exercised their moral agency. The existential situation of Afro-American women cannot be understood and explained adequately apart from [the] historical background. The history of the Black woman in the United States generates the conditions for the patterns of ethical behavior and moral wisdom which have emerged in the Black female community. (para. 8)

Framed by the two issues of limited research focused on Black women's spiritual formation, this study centered on the corporate aspects of Christian BGLO sorority women and their transformation into the *imago Dei*. The study relied on the women's perspective of their lived experiences. Harris and Sewell (2012) began this work by contending that the relationship between BGLOs and Christianity evinced in three distinct ways:

> First, the church as the cornerstone of the Black community guided BGLO founders, most if not all of whom were Christian. Second, Christianity provided a philosophical basis for the Black secret society's initiatives. Third, Christianity also provided guiding principles for early white Greek-letter organizations, which had a marked influence on the structural framework of BGLOs. (p. 63)

The thread that binds the aspects of Black Spirituality, Black Greek Letter Organizations and the concepts of Black Feminist Thought represents how one might define community among Black women.

Purpose Statement

This phenomenological study explored how active engagement with other Christians in a Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO) sorority impacts the spiritual growth of its Christian members. One of the subsidiary issues explored was the influence of relationships within their sororities that may impact their journeys as Christians striving to become Christ-like. This is the will of God for all believers (New King James Version,1982/2021, 2 Cor. 3:18). The definition of Christian spiritual formation has evolved from the traditional Catholic emphasis on the practices of prayer, Bible reading, and fasting (Sheldrake, as cited in Teo, 2017) to a broader understanding of a spiritual development process. For this study, these practices help evaluate spiritually beneficial formative practices. Willard (2002) noted that spiritual formation could occur for every person, believing that every human spirit is influenced by the spiritual realm or by the sociocultural factors. Willard (2002) draws the distinction that Christian spiritual formation requires being a born-again, spirit-filled believer in Christ. Wilhoit (as cited in Teo, 2017) affirms Willard's point and adds that a person is influenced either positively or negatively, and that the formational process takes place constantly throughout one's life. These practices served as the guide for the research questions, with emphasis on corporate engagement. An element of community in spiritual formation is the corporate engagement involved in loving one another. It involves taking inventory of believers' walk of faith with God while healthily forming meaningful communal relationships with others, often evidenced through missional outreach like community service (Von Gunter, 2021). Additionally, it involves examining corporate engagement through spiritually formative practices among members. As explained by Tang (as cited by Teo, 2017), the goals of spiritual formation include the following: first, believers are transformed into Christlikeness on the personal or individual level; then, believers demonstrate

evidence of that transformation as they grow as a people of God through community engagement; lastly, believers engage in the work of establishing and expanding the Kingdom of God at the missional level through outreach and service (p. 142). Zscheile (2012) suggests that the "missional church views mission as definitive of what the church is because the church is a product of and participant in God's mission" (p. 6). Therefore, missional engagement constituted evidence of the transformative objective of Christlikeness affirmed in Matthew 20:28. Missional community outreach is the core of BGLOs; how then is their participation in missional outreach an outward expression of their spiritual formation progression (Teo, 2017, para. 9-10)?

Research Questions

RQ1. In what way is active engagement evidenced in a BGLO sorority with other Christian members?

Subsidiary question: How often do you practice the spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, silence, meditation, and service to others with Christian members of your sorority

Subsidiary question: What is the frequency of your active engagement in mutually beneficial Christian formation with Christian members of your sorority?

RQ2. How has active engagement with other Christians in a BGLO sorority influenced Christian members' spiritual growth?

Subsidiary question: How has active engagement in the sorority positively influenced your spiritual growth?

Subsidiary question: How has active engagement in your sorority deepened your relationship with God?

RQ3. How do the activities or initiatives of the sorority that these members engage in with other Christians contribute to the spiritual formation of a Christian sorority sister?

Subsidiary question: How has your active engagement in your sorority positively influenced another Christian sorority member's spiritual growth?

Subsidiary question: How has your active engagement in your sorority been shared with other Christians outside of the sorority?

RQ4. How has engagement in community service and social justice with other Christian sorority members influenced your spiritual growth?

Subsidiary question: How has active participation in community service activities with other Christian sorority members influenced your Christian spiritual formation?

Subsidiary question: How has active participation in social justice projects with other Christian sorority members influenced your Christian spiritual formation?

Assumptions and Delimitations

This study assumes that spiritual formation is, in part, an outcome of spiritual disciplines such as Lectio Divina, which strongly emphasizes prayer, meditation, and contemplation of God's word (Tang, 2014) as the building blocks of spiritual growth. Expanding on that assumption and including the assertion that these practices are church traditions, many writers on spiritual formation have asserted their practice in community as an essential for maturation. Spiritual maturation toward transformation into the *imago Dei* is manifested through the ministry of Christ to others, operating in servanthood and forgiveness. This is found in scripture, "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (*New King James Version,* 1982/2021, Matt. 20:28). Demarest (2010) notes it is important to acknowledge that though similar to discipleship, spiritual formation is not merely concerned with biblical exhortation and instruction in orthodox doctrine but also with the teaching of "many practices that open [the believer] to the presence and direction of God and nurtured the character traits of Christ into fruition" (p. 24). Lowe and Lowe (2018) acknowledge that Christian spiritual formation is collaborative with the Holy Spirit and other believers. Inherent in this definition is the notion that the traits of Christ are lived out in the way that we connect. Spiritual growth may be measured based on Jesus's teaching of the two Greatest Commandments in Mark 12:29-31, where the first addresses our relationship with God, and the second emphasizes our relationship

with others. These two commandments indicate the core of spiritual formation as one becomes more like Jesus (Tang, 2014). As Tang (2014) has suggested, the measurable phases of spiritual formation have three levels that illustrate growth, which he derived after examining the formative strands of spiritual formation as proposed by Reed and Neville (2013). The three phases are: (a) Believers acquire a Christlikeness at the personal level, (b) Become a people of God at the community level, and (c) Believers establish the Kingdom of God at the missional level. These three phases allow the Holy Spirit's influence on a personal level to development and refining at the community level and the missional level, where God's people will influence the environment as an outward manifestation of an inward transformation.

Assumptions Concerning Black Culture and the Church

Black culture in America has developed in a strained dichotomy distinct from mainstream American culture yet greatly influencing it. As a result, the culture of African Americans desires to practice their traditions while countering the persisting racial segregation and oppression in America. Despite these obstacles, African American culture has become a significant part of mainstream American culture and remains a distinct culture apart from it (Brown, 2013). As this study focuses on Black women's membership in BGLOs, consideration of factors in the larger society on their development gives a broader lens of how these organizations in community impact them spiritually. The precedencies of communal formative patterns such as fictive kinship, social networks, and others among descendants of the African diaspora establish a plausible assumption concerning the study population (Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 1994).

The church has historically played a significant role in the Black community with institutions of education, social and benevolent societies, and other outposts of humanitarianism established through the church (Harris & Sewell, 2012). Considering that the church and many of

the organizations and institutions of the Black community share historical ties, it is plausible to

assume there is a connection between sorority members and a solid link to faith communities.

Harris and Sewell (2012) noted the connection:

> Howard Odum ranked membership in Black secret societies [secret societies have
> restricted memberships, and admission requires potential members to submit to one or
> more rituals. The authors include Masons and BGLO under this definition.] as equal in
> importance to membership in the Black church, and sometimes more so. According to
> *Who's Who of the Colored Race for 1915*, two-thirds of the most prominent Blacks were
> members of both Black churches and Black secret societies (Mather, 2014). In fact, early
> on, secret societies served as the dominant form of voluntary association, second only to
> churches in membership size. (p. 67)

Delimitations Concerning Spiritual Formation

The scope of this study is limited to the accounts of lived experiences of spiritually

formative practices and missional outreach among Christian Black women who are actively

engaged members of BGLO sororities. The pre-qualification criteria for participation in the study

required that they be born-again Christians indwelt with the Holy Spirit and be active members

in a graduate chapter of a BGLO sorority. BGLOs are non-religious organizations. They do not

restrict membership based on faith. Yet, this study was not seeking to determine if these are

Christian organizations but rather whether the Christian members of these organizations' spirit

growth has been impacted by their active engagement in them.

Delimitations of the Research Design

The research sample came from the Southern region of the United States, often called the

Bible belt. This informal term describes an area with conservative Protestant values and church

attendance numbers exceeding the national average (World Population Review, 2022). The

participants came from the Southern Region (Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina,

and Texas). Geographically, study participants did not represent the entire southern region of the

Bible Belt of the United States. BGLO membership is predominantly comprised of Black women who are among America's most religiously observant demographic (Pew Research Center, 2020b); for this study, they were the targeted demographic. While there are nine member organizations in the Pan-Hellenic Council which governs Black Greek Letter Organizations, this study delimited its purview to active members of the four sorority organizations: Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, and Zeta Phi Beta Sorority. The study did not include the five BGLO fraternities in the Pan-Hellenic Council or non-Pan-Hellenic Council organizations. Not all sorority members within the geographical area were included in the study because the study did not include general members or those who are not part of a local chapter. It also did not include undergraduate or former members because they did not meet the active engagement parameters. Research participants met the following requirements: a Black woman, over the age of eighteen, a born-again Christian, regularly attend or are a member of a church, have a minimum of two years of active status within their sorority chapter, and serve on one of their sorority committees including social justice, community outreach, rituals, health, and traditions, or sisterhood.

Definition of Terms

This section provides definitions of the terms that are pertinent to understanding the proposed study. The descriptions clarify how the researcher understands and will use the terms to explore the topic.

1. *Active Engagement:* Sorority members who maintain sorority membership (financial dues are current) within a local graduate chapter with consistent attendance record and participation in monthly meetings, participation in sorority sponsored community outreach events, and participation in at least two service committees within the organization (Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., 2021).

2. *Blacks:* This researcher's preference is to identify race, as it is inclusive of the cultural diversity among all African descendants (also known as the African or Afro Diaspora) and is a more culturally inclusive term than African Americans (Quander & Froneberger, 2019).

3. *Colorism:* "A practice of discrimination by which those with lighter skin are treated more favorably than those with darker skin. This practice is a product of racism in the United States, in that it upholds the white standards of beauty and benefits white people in the institutions of oppression (media, medical world, etc.)" (National Conference for Community and Justice, 2021, para.3).

4. *Divine Nine* – consists of nine-member Black Greek letter organizations, including Alpha Phi Alpha, Alpha Kappa Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi, Delta Sigma Theta, Phi Beta Sigma, Zeta Phi Beta, Omega Psi Phi, Sigma Gamma Rho, and Iota Phi Theta (National Pan-Hellenic Council, 2020).

5. *Fictive Kinship:* "This refers to familial-like bonds with no blood relationship. A predominant attribute in Black culture that originates from the West African tradition and intensified by the legacy of slavery, which manifests linguistically, across generations, and institutionally" (Chatters et al., 1994, p. 298).

6. *Frat:* Fraternity Brother (Valdosta State University Student Life, n.d.).

7. *Soror*: Sorority sister (Valdosta State University Student Life, n.d.).

8. *Spiritual Formation* : "Spiritual formation comprises a few spiritual disciplines that assist us in communing with Yahweh. A list of practices [for example, fellowship, prayer, biblical study, and service] can incorporate numerous disciplines but the desired outcome is the same: spiritual growth" (Peacock, 2020, p. 4). "It likewise is a progressive process guided by the Holy Spirit toward transformation into the fullness of Christ" (Teo, 2017, p.142).

9. *Spirituality*: Spirituality involves the recognition, sense, or belief that something is greater than oneself, more to being human than the sensory experience. Alternatively, Christian spirituality refers to the relationship between God and man that can be summed up under four headings: holiness, the gift of the Spirit, life in the Spirit, and the discipline of the Spirit.

Significance of the Study

This study endeavored to explore spiritual formation through the lens of Christian Black women in a holistic manner. The study explored the degree to which active engagement between

Christian BGLO members influenced their spiritual growth. Previous studies have addressed components of this study, such as spirituality, yet not the impact of that spirituality on Black women's spiritual formation. Additionally, previous studies discussed spiritual formation without an ecological approach that considered the influence of unique social factors that impact Black women's experiences. There are numerous studies of BGLOs predominantly focused on fraternities and faith. Despite the statistical evidence and historical record demonstrating Black women's heightened levels of spirituality, there remains a lack of research on the intersection of these two variables. The study inquiry into the connections between formative spiritual development and active engagement in a BGLO sorority will expand how Christian leadership approaches and engages diverse perspectives of spiritual formation.

Summary of Design

This phenomenological qualitative study provides an extensive description of the phenomenon of spiritual growth among Christian BGLO sorority members as impacted by their BGLO sorority engagement. This study employed preliminary qualifying criteria for online interviews. The study sampled from three of the four Divine Nine sororities to narrow the participants. Those participants that met the research sample qualifications of being born again Christians, over 18 and active graduate members were interviewed, and the interviews were transcribed, then the research findings formed into a fundamental structure using the method described by Colaizzi's phenomenological method. They aligned with research questions on spiritual growth.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.

-Ecclesiastes 4:9–10

Overview

This segment outlines the literature used to form the theoretical and theological framework guiding this study's exploration of the spiritual growth among Christian Black Greek Letter Organizations' sorority members. The related literature examines BGLOs' roots at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), denoting the connection that tethers them to the Black community's deep roots in the church, where both have their origins. The works and studies highlighted below provide essential insight, context, and background of the study's participants. The literature review intends to provide the reader with a synopsis of relevant literature for this researcher's topic. The research divides the chapter into five parts as follows: (1) Theological Framework, (2) Theoretical Framework, (3) Related Literature, (4) Rationale for Study and the Gap in the Literature, and (5) Conclusions going forward.

Theological Framework for the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study is to explore how active engagement with other Christians in BGLO sororities has influenced the spiritual growth of Christian members. This study explored phenomenon through the framework of an ecological approach proposed by Lowe and Lowe (2018), utilizing the descriptors identified in the outcome phases of the Christian spiritual formation process described by Teo (2017). The history,

observations, and the research findings related to this research will provide the general background for this literature review.

Theological Framework for Assessing Spiritual Growth in Community

This study's theological discussion begins with Pettit (2008) defining spiritual formation as "the ongoing process of the triune God transforming the believer's life and character toward the life and character of Jesus Christ—accomplished by the ministry of the Spirit in the context of biblical community" (p. 24). Mattis, as cited in Lowe & Lowe, (2018) declared,

> It is critical that scholars take an ecological approach to studies of spiritual maturity . . . An ecological approach to the study of spiritual formation means that we zoom out and study the subject less from an individualistic orientation and more from a corporate perspective. (p. 207)

Lowe and Lowe (2018) have done extensive work on the matter of an ecological approach to spiritual formation, and describe the interaction involved in the community of believers toward spiritual formation by noting,

> The social connections we have with other people and our interactions to maintain those connections make us socially contagious—for better or worse. The spiritual ecology of the body of Christ partakes of the same connections and interactions necessary for spiritual growth and influence (spiritual contagion). (p. 16)

The Apostle Paul echoes some of this interaction in Ephesians. Paul emphasizes the unity of the Church:

> There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all (New King James Version,1982/2021, Eph. 4:4).

The Epistle reinforces unity without the constraint of uniformity and, in so doing, creates an imagery of a body designed to function in relationship with one another (Bible Project, 2016).

A measure of progress toward developing the fullness in Christ is the process of spiritual growth. The writer of Hebrews (*New King James Version*,1982/2021, Heb. 5:12–14) tells believers they should desire growth in Christ, implying that God expects us to grow throughout our spiritual journey. This study was central to how spiritual formation takes shape in a corporate setting. One aspect Pettit (2008) reflected on was the significance of connectedness in the community by noting:

> The connectedness is designed so that we work in concert with each other. Any doubt is erased when one thinks of Jesus' last prayer before he faced the cross in John 17, a prayer for unity among believers. This point is also seen in Ephesians 4:1–16 when one examines the reason for the spiritual gifts Christ gives in the community. It is for our mutual edification. The assumption of all of these texts is that spiritual formation is a very public, corporate exercise. Unlike a diet or an exercise program, God's program for getting us into spiritual shape requires working out alongside others. (p. 110)

The topic of spiritual formation has evolved from its origins in the Catholic tradition emphasizing prayer, Bible reading, and fasting (Sheldrake as cited in Teo, 2017). While these disciplines are still essential for spiritual growth, contemporary authors espouse a more holistic understanding of how believers grow in Christ that extends beyond these disciplines to include a greater constitution (Teo, 2017). Palmer (as cited in Teo, 2017) lists three areas that shape one's spiritual formation: "the study of sacred texts, the practice of prayer and contemplation, and the gathered life of the community itself" (p. 55). The outward demonstration of the inward transformation through communal spiritual formation manifested in what Teo described as the missional phase, characterized by an outward trajectory of bringing transformational change to others.

Zscheile (2012) suggests that the "missional church views mission as definitive of what the church is because the church is a product of and participant in God's mission" (p. 24). Zscheile proposes that spirituality driven by selfless involvement in missional outreach partially

constitutes the evidence of growth toward Christlikeness (*New King James Version*, 1986/2021, Matt, 20:28): "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

An Ecological Understanding of Spiritual Formation in Community

When effectively studying people of Afro-diasporic descent, the pathology of forming community is a consistent social construct that factors into their spirituality and spiritual growth. It is helpful to envision spiritual formation in the community as a lush green rainforest canopy, a familiar image for this researcher from childhood memories of trips through Fern Gully in Jamaica. The large mature trees supported by a bed made from a complex network of interdependent, interconnected, and intertwined roots and vines burrowing deep into the ground and across the earth's surface beneath them while simultaneously spanning out in every direction. As noted by Lowe and Lowe (2018), "Christians connected to Christ (vertical) and to one another (horizontal) have spiritual ties that create a vast web of interconnections that, through the Spirit, form them into a sympsychoi—a unified soul or person" (p. 160). This is an affirmed concept in scripture, "Whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit" (*New King James Version,*1982/2021, 1 Cor. 6:17). Additionally, members of BGLO sororities report strong nurturing ties that foster the bonds of sisterhood and lifelong fictive relationships, which serve as sustaining forces in their lives (Brown et al., 2012b).

Spiritual Growth in Community is Progressive and Reciprocal

During the transformative journey, believers undergo a restorative process, as Pettit (2008) noted. According to Pettit (2008), to completely understand "the panorama of God's revelation of reconciliation, we must climb four prominent peaks (the Trinity, humanity in the image of God, the God-man Jesus Christ, and salvation) and descend into one murky valley (the

fall and sinfulness of humanity)" (p. 35). Pettit (2008) begins with a panoramic view of God's

reconciliatory plan, asserting that through the word, God reveals himself as relational through his

existence as the Triune Godhead consisting of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thereby the Lord

sets a precedence of intentions concerning his creation to grow and thrive in communion with

one another. Pettit is cautious to note that these are not three distinct entities but three persons

representing one God. The metaphor of the church as the body having many parts yet functioning

as a unified body is described,"For just as we have many members in one body and all the

members do not have the same function" (*New King James Version,*1982/2021, Rom. 12:4).

There is a repetitive motif throughout scripture of how mankind has been made in the image of

an infinitely multifaceted relational God. As believers, our transformation and conformity into

the fullness of Christ will reflect scripture. The writer to the church at Corinth notes, "For even

as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are

many, are one body, so also is Christ " (*New King James Version,*1982/2021, 1 Cor. 12:12). As

born-again believers as he (Christ Jesus) is, so are we in this world (*New King James

Version,*1982/2021, 1 John 4:17). Pettit (2008) further explains how the scripture points to the

true nature of God as love and his desire to form a community of image bearers to participate in

an intimate relationship reflective of the unity he experiences in the Trinity. He desires to

experience a similar intimacy with his creation for pleasure and glory (Pettit, 2008). Therefore,

spiritual formation is the ongoing process where believers learn and develop the right

relationships with God, self, and others as they spiritually act and behave in Christlikeness (Teo,

2017). Viewing spiritual formation as a social ecology reinforces that spiritual formation

flourishes in a corporate relational environment. Lowe and Lowe (2018) affirm that "In God's

ecology, individual things and people do not grow alone. They grow when they connect to and interact with the ultimate source of life and other growing people" (p. 29).

Spiritual formation begins with the personal kenosis experience of salvation when believers declare their profession of faith (*New King James Version,*1986/2021, Rom. 10:9) and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (*New King James Version,*1982/2021, John 14:17, Tit. 3:5, 2 Pet. 1:4; 1 Cor. 6:19-20). The Holy Spirit is the driving force that collaborates with the believer and enables the transformative progression of Christian spiritual formation. Lowe and Lowe (2018) say, "Paul trusted the Spirit to work through these organic connections to empower, encourage, and edify individually and collectively" (p. 169). Teo (2017) describes the second phase of communal formation, where believers grow, develop in and through the community through fellowship, discipleship, and corporately as a natural evolution of faith's commitment, yet also a necessary mechanism for continued progressive spiritual growth. Lowe (2018) says in his presentation entitled "*The Targeted Outcome of Spiritual Formation*" that it is essential to know that the goal of spiritual formation is a type of sanctification. Where the individual believer and the corporate body of Christ are spiritually mature in Him (Christ), the Holy Spirit empowers this level of obedience in faith (Lowe & Lowe, 2018).

The outgrowth of the transformative process manifests when believers demonstrate growth and maturity via external ministry to others in loving, selfless service to one another (*New King James Version,*1982/2021, Matt. 20:28). Pettit (2008) summarizes the mechanisms used by the Holy Spirit to develop the believer in the community: "God divinely enables spiritual growth through three essential resources: God's word, God's Spirit, and God's people the Church" (p. 45). A thriving spiritual ecology functions when individuals grow from new converts to babes in Christ to mature disciples of God well equipped for advancing his kingdom

on earth. The Great Commission, the last command given to the disciples in scripture, serves as

our guide for our primary call on believers. The Christian life was not meant to be pursued in

isolation, but the Bible conveys that we need one another to conform to the body of Christ and to

be like Jesus (Lowe & Lowe, 2018).

Now that the researcher has established that community is essential and the intention of

God for believers, the study will focus its exploration of how community spiritual formation

manifests in Black Spirituality. One of the unique facets of Black Spirituality is the emphasis on

communal functioning and identity, that has direct ties to Afro-diasporic roots that have

remained intact despite encountering western societal influences. Jenkins (2011) states,

> The community of God is not a western world phenomenon, and that goal should not be
> to become a western evangelical Christian. The wonderful truth is that communities of
> Christians in every language and from all countries are included in the process of being
> conformed to the image of Christ. The body of Christ is diverse, and we have much to
> learn from each other. God is good to give us each other, now if only we could get along
> as Jesus prayed for us (John 17:20-23)! (pp. 151-157)

Community and fictive kinship were the models established by the early

church forefathers like Peter, Paul, and the disciples. This resonated with enslaved communities

whose survival relied heavily on the strength of the community.

Fictive Kinship and Aspect of Black Spirituality

Addressing Black Spirituality's connection to fictive kinship begins with an assumption

verified through a study of African and Afro-diasporic religious history. Ackah et al. (2017)

state:

> For the most part, African descendant communities, wherever they are found, are
> predominantly communities with spiritual underpinnings, and spirituality is the guiding
> element by which their lives are framed, no matter their location in the world. African
> communities are dynamic and diverse, with their religions and spirituality having been
> shaped by factors of geographic location, organized religious settings, enslavement,
> colonialism, social oppression, and the contemporary globalized world. (p. 16)

Likewise, framing the terminology will help to guide our discussion forward; there are three descriptions for the use of fictive kin terms: (a) As a form of address used for persons who assume the status of supplementary or replacement kin, (b) As a form of address which expresses familiarity within a personal relationship, and (c) Use of the term as a public validation of a special kind of association (Ibsen & Klobus, 1972). BGLOs encourage community by building meaningful lifelong peer relationships based on common commitment to service and other shared interests. Their organizations are places where all three forms of fictive kin terms are used (Astin et al., 2010; Holmes & Flowers, 2004), a dynamic with direct influence from the Black church and the concept of having a church family (Harris & Sewell, 2012). These fictive kin relationships integrate informal, supportive networks that surpass formal obligations conventionally prescribed by blood or marriage. Fictive kin are individuals unrelated by either blood or marriage but regarded in kinship terms (Sussman, 1976, as cited in Taylor et al., 2013). Fictive kin have the same rights and statuses as family members and participate in the duties of the extended family (Chatters et al., 1994). For instance, Lincoln and Mamiya (as cite in Taylor et al., 2013) note that,

> People frequently describe members of church networks using kinship terms in which fellow congregation members are called "Brother" or "Sister" and church members are regarded as one's "church family." Consequently, in some instances, members of fictive kin networks and congregational support networks may overlap. (p. 611)

Scripture repeatedly uses familial motifs to depict believers as the family of God (*New King James Version,*1982/2021, Rom. 8:15) or when the Lord declares, "I will be a Father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty" (*New King James Version,*1982/2021, 2 Cor. 6:18). As God's sons and daughters, Christian believers have been

ingrafted and made co-heirs in Christ Jesus, molding us to the preeminent template of his image.

Pettit (2008) succinctly explains,

> The scripture holds forth Jesus as our ultimate example to follow in spiritual formation. And as we follow him obediently in discipleship, which is living as he lived, we are increasingly conformed to his image (Luke 6:40; Galatians 4:19; Colossians 3:10). (p. 12)

The fictive kinship within the Black church reflects the solid communal bonds prevalent in the first-century church. Nzioki (2017) describes how the early church used a fictive kin model for discipleship:

> The first-century church was a close-knit family that met in people's homes. Macpherson (2007) states, New Testament churches were a community. It was more than just seeing each other once or twice a week across the aisle at a church service. Rather than being a collection of families, the entire church was one big, close-knit family.7 (p. 7)

The disciples formed the early church by practicing discipleship through fellowship, as one transformed to "…becoming more like Jesus," implemented within the community context, enabling believers to share the journey with others (Byrd, 2011, p. 246). Scripture tells us,

> They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Every day they continued to meet in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (*New International Version,*1973/2011, Acts 2:42, 43, 46-47)

BGLOs encourage their members' active engagement with their communities and within the sorority. That active engagement is like biblical concepts that encourages serving and loving one another. Glerup as cited in Teo (2017) writes,

> Spiritual formation takes place by the direct work of the Holy Spirit, regenerating and conforming us to the image of Jesus Christ as the Spirit indwells, fills, guides, gifts, and empowers people for life in the community of faith and the world. (p. 251)

Scripture affirms God's design for us to thrive in the community (*New King James Version,*1982/2021, Acts 2:42–47, Ecclesiastes 4:9–12, Rom. 12:4–5). Lowe and Lowe (2018) analyzed the New Testament's use of the Greek term *sympsychoi*, which translates as "together in spirit." The terminology suggests a unified spirit as a foundational concept in community, a oneness that goes beyond just a shared communal identity. Christians indwelled with the Holy Spirit as born-again believers in Jesus Christ are examples of persons who share an identity in Christ.

Measuring Spiritual Growth

The various phases of spiritual formation measure the evidence of transformation. As such, BGLO sororities strive to demonstrate formative elements when they serve others. Paul notes this when he writes, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the other " (*New King James Version,*1982/2021, Phil. 2:3-4). In the context of this study, community engagement represents a visible outward expression of inward transformation to measure an aspect of progression in spiritual growth (Parr, 2021). Zscheile (2012) notes,

> In Christendom, the prevailing paradigm is a church-with-a-mission. The mission is ancillary to the church's life rather than constitutive of the church's core identity. In contrast, the missional church views mission as definitive of what the church is because it is a product of and participant in God's mission. (p. 6)

While missional outreach is evidentiary of spiritual growth, it encompasses a duality as both a measure and a mechanism. How does this missional outreach mechanism as part of spiritual growth manifest ministerially among membership engagement in BGLOs mission initiatives outside the church? According to Issler (2010), undergirding the ministry of spiritual formation are attributes of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, including inner heart formation,

missional participation, scriptural saturation, dependence on God, relational church, and discernment. Issler established the six themes mentioned as measures that this study utilized to assess spiritual growth among the participants. Christ calls his followers to missional love in the community. In John 13:35, Jesus states, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another" (New King James Version, 1982/2021). The Greek term for love in John 13:35 is Philia and means close friendship or brotherly love in Greek. Philia encompasses love for fellow humans, care, respect, and compassion for needy people (Zavada, 2020). So, the spiritual growth progression in our relationship with him transforms us, then believers are empowered in missions to others; this is the total sense of the Greek term agape love (Willard, 2000).

While the six themes highlighted by Issler constitute a complete developmental process, this study will concentrate on the second and third themes presented by Issler specifically as described in Table 1. Issler's themes illustrate spiritual outcomes and spiritual prerequisites in a reciprocal progression in the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our spiritual development. The believer's engagement in fellowship within their local congregation and active participation in missional outreach are essential tools the Holy Spirit uses in molding believers' lifestyles toward Christlikeness.

Table 1

Issler's Six Themes

Six Themes and the Ministry of the Spirit

Six Formational Themes	Related Ministries of the Holy Spirit to Support Formation	
1. Seeking/Loving/ Depending on God Above All	Regeneration Adoption Indwelling Filling	"The love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us" Rom 5:5; 1 John 4:19; "The fellowship of the Holy Spirit" 2 Cor 13:14; Rom 8:9, 11, 15–16; Eph 5:18
2. Relational At-tachment as Jesus' Church	Unity, Love	"Be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit" Eph 4:3; Phil 2:1; "The fruit of the Spirit is love" Gal 5:22
3. Missional Participation	Spiritual Gifts	"To each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" 1 Cor 12:7 11; "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses" Acts 1:8; 1 Cor 2:4
4. Scriptural Saturation	Illumination, Guidance	"Take . . . the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" Eph. 6:17; John 16:13; 1 Cor 2:12; "the Spirit of truth" John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13
5. Inner Heart Formation	Fruit	"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithful-ness, gentleness and self-control" Gal 5:22–23; Rom 8:13; 2 Cor 3:18; "Holy" Spirit
6. Two Kingdoms Discernment	Of the Spirit vs. of the "Flesh"	"Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh" Gal 5:16; Rom 8:5–6; "By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error" 1 John 4:6 [NASV]; Rom 14:17

Note. Reprinted from "Six themes to guide spiritual formation ministry based on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount," by Issler, K., 2010, *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry*, *7*(2), 366-388. https://doi.org/10.1177/073989131000700209

Spiritual Growth's Connection to BGLO Philanthropy

The selfless, unconditional agape love motivates servanthood among individual believers due to an intimate fellowship with Christ Jesus. The intimate fellowship with Christ is the solid foundation from which we get understanding (*New King James Version*,1982/2021, Prov.3:5-6), garner wisdom (*New King James Version*,1982/2021, James 1:5), and, most critically, maintain humility as servants like our role model, Christ Jesus. The goal of emulating servanthood like the

Lord is part of spiritual growth as described in Matthew 20:28. Scripture is replete with examples that in community, our spirit, soul, and body are made resilient, transformative, shaped via the interaction of fellowship (*New King James Version*,1982/2021, Prov. 27:17). Through this transformational process into Christ's image, the overflowing love spread abroad in our hearts has a natural outpouring in the form of missional ministering to others. According to Heutel et al. (n.d.), the philanthropic spirit of missional community outreach is central to BGLOs at their core and is rooted in the familial notion of extended and fictive kinship.

Black sororities offer resources and services to Black communities focused on education, political awareness, economic stability, and healthy lifestyles (Sapp, 2016). BGLOs can make a significant impact on their communities and the world with the philanthropies that they support. For example, 2,500 fraternity brothers of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity contributed about $9 million of economic impact to stimulate entrepreneurship in Philadelphia (DeShields, 2020). In 2019 Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority's HBCU Endowment Fund distributed $10 million in financial support to 96 accredited institutions (DeShields, 2020). The BGLOs' principles include brotherhood and sisterhood, scholarship, and servant leadership. Giving among Divine Nine members and chapters is rooted in a collective commitment to racial uplift. All nine Pan-Hellenic Council [Black] Greek Letter Organizations invested in community uplift through social justice, philanthropy, and scholarship (Debose, 2018). These elements of racial uplift are a common thread that unites the BGLO sororities. They exemplify missional outreach to others (*New King James Version*,1982/2021, Mark 10:45), "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." Members participate in community service, donating their time, talent, and finances for the common good (Johnson, n.d.), following (*New King James Version*,1982/2021, 1 Pet. 4:10), "Each of you should use

whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms." Each organization has numerous educational, financial, voter registration, and empowerment programs that serve as outreach in the community aligning with the goal of racial uplifting, a mantle set forth by distinguished scholar W.E.B Dubois.

Practical Ministry of "Racial Uplifting"

In September of 1903, scholar W.E.B Dubois set forth the theory of "the talented tenth" expressed in his book from an influential essay widely published. It addressed what Dubois proposed was the underlying question facing Blacks in America, "How does it feel to be a problem?" He entitled it, *The Negro Problem.* According to the talented tenth theory (Dubois, 1903b), "The Negro race like all races is going to be saved by its exceptional men" (p. 33). This notion influenced the BGLOs' acceptance of the mantle of leadership and accountability for uplifting the community. Dubois (1930) clarified that education and work are levers for uplift and that only through our own trained Negro leaders can this be obtained. He stated, "The talented tenth of the Negro race must be made leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people" (p.75). BGLOs have taken the mantle outlined in the concept of the talented tenth, establishing a high standard amongst their membership that is a draw for prospective members. The University of Iowa Office of the Vice President of Student Life conducted interviews with students who joined BGLOs:

> I joined a Black Greek organization because I wanted the experience of an unmatched sisterhood, with women who had a genuine passion for serving and leading the Black community, Bridges said. I knew that a sisterhood of Black women, specifically Delta women, would place me in an elite group of like-minded, high achieving women, who could be role models for my life long after I joined (Rainey, 2016, para. 6).

Christian BGLO sorority members, through their organizations, have a unique opportunity to experience one of the themes of spiritual growth in community highlighted by

Issler's analysis of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus highlights missional approach as part of a

disciple's calling to be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world." Nolland (as cited in

Issler, 2010, p.383) explains that "the only discipleship Matthew recognizes is a discipleship in

mission," explicitly addressed in the gospel of Matthew (*New King James Version,* 1986/2021,

Matt. 5:13-16). Additionally, Sapp (2016) highlights,

> The program initiatives are geared toward the upward mobility of sorority members and African Americans in Black communities, focusing on women's issues and concerns. Designing programs to address women's issues and concerns related to education, social, economics, and politics. Concerning sisterhood, the sorority hosts events for their members such as retreats, social events, and training workshops to develop bonds among the members and prepare members to provide services to the Black community. (p. 112)

Theoretical Framework for the Study

This research study's focus on BGLO sororities is a topic not widely familiar or

examined outside of the Black community yet introduces the unique corporate experiences and

paradigms of Black women. Chapter One and the theological section of Chapter Two offer Black

Spirituality as a paradigm for understanding elements of spiritual formation among Black

women. In this section the researcher is presenting Black Feminist Thought's connections with

Black spirituality.

Black Feminist Thought

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) argues by definition that the overall content of the

thought and the historical and factual circumstances of Black women are inseparable from their

perspectives as Black women. Therefore, BFT proposes that others act as mere transcribers,

whereas Black women are authors of their unique standpoint on or perspective of their

experiences (Collins, 2000). Since they live life as Black women, certain commonalities of

outlook exist that include familial and fictive bonds, spirituality, and communal cultural identity.

There are also distinctions based on class diversity, regional differences, age, sexual orientation, even nationality, resulting in different common themes (Collins, 1998). Thus, African American women's historical struggles against racial and gender oppression and the variegated experiences of classism all comprise elements of their unique worldview. Experiences of oppression, like all human experiences, affect how women and men code and decode sacred and secular reality (Martin, 1990). However, academic literature on Black sororities in general and alumnae chapters is limited (Sapp, 2016). Many theories are acceptable to most of the population. However, they are inadequate in addressing the societal dynamics Black women navigate, considering multiple identities and intersectional factors that Black women specifically face. Black women have adapted coping mechanisms that allow them to counteract societal disparities like systemic racism, double oppression, outsider-within syndrome, invisibility, and microaggression with counter spaces and social networks. As Harmon and Horn (2021) noted,

> Counterspace refers to safe spaces that lie in the margins outside of mainstream spaces (Ong. Et al., 2018). These are spaces where Black women feel seen and heard in a way that cannot be achieved in most predominantly white spaces where broad societal and racial narratives persist. Black people in the U.S. have known the unique healing that is only possible in spaces of belonging, which authors have referred to as homeplaces (Hooks, 1990) or sister circles (Allen, 2019; Neal-Barnett, 2011; Croom et al., 2017), places where Black women can rest and recover from ongoing experiences of oppression. (pp. 105-112)

BGLO sororities represent such counter spaces. BFT is an appropriate framework for the specificity of perspectives necessary to address Black women as the focus of phenomenological research (Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

Collins (1998) argued, via her theoretical framework of BFT, that Black women's experiences and identities are understood through their socialization systems. This dynamic

encompasses 'intersectionality' (Natarajan, 2022). BFT is not solely concerned with gender equity, often associated with the term feminism; instead, the emphasis is on gender reconciliation as women of color seek to persevere against the damages to familial dynamics that enslavement and oppression's legacy have inflicted within the Black community (Natarajan, 2022).

Porter's Identity Development Model as a Visual Reference

According to Porter et al. (2019), BFT guided the construction of Porter's original 2013 model, then revised and current (comprehensive revision) models of identity development in Black undergraduate women. Although the Porter's Identity Model is focused explicitly on undergraduate women, drawing some correlations from the target sample population similar to this study, the model highlights the influence of the narrow dominant society's agenda and media impact on Black women (Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

Collins (2000) elaborated on three parts of BFT:

1. The philosophy is guided by the experiences of Black women, even though others have documented their stories.

2. The interlocking nature of oppression through the crucial intersections and similarities that connect Black women.

3. BFT attempts to redefine Black women's culture.

Black Feminist Thought provides a critical curricular stance based on knowledge Black women already possess. It provides the opportunity to develop critical media literacy skills, developing their oppositional gaze toward the media's attempt to define Black women's identity in stereotypical narratives. Jacobs (2016) refers to these parts as tenets of Black Feminist Thought, arguing they are beneficial lenses through which Black women can analyze their

depictions across media. This phenomenological study references Porter's (2019) revised identity development model of Black undergraduate women as a template representing Black women's socialization processes applicable to graduate BGLO members who have completed their matriculation, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Model of Identity Development in Black Undergraduate Women
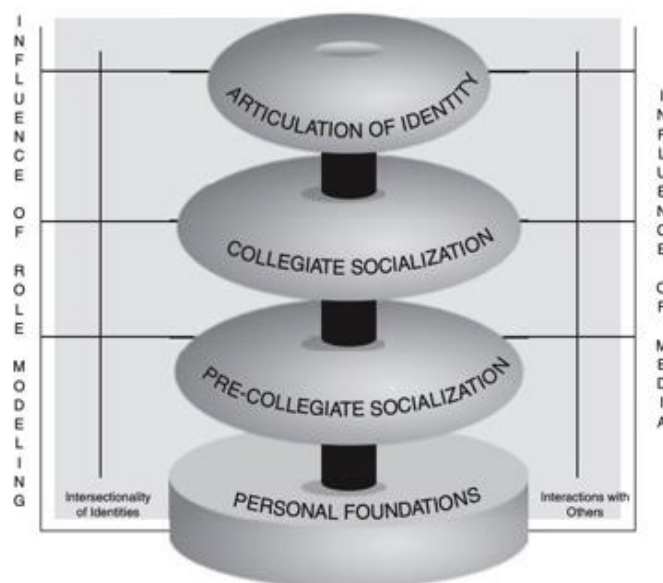
Note: Reprinted from "Black women's socialization and identity development in college: Advancing Black Feminist Thought," by Porter, C., Green, Q., Daniels, M., and Smola, M., 2019, *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, *57*(3), 253–265. https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2019.1683021

Related Literature

This literature review section formed the foundational focus relevant to the subject matter and supports a broader overview. This literature review notes that the evolution of BGLOs has not developed in a societal vacuum. It behooves the study to explore this research endeavor with

a deeper understanding of the societal and historical context that influenced Black culture, the Black church, and Black women's spiritual growth.

The Black Church from Enslavement to Faith

Religion, particularly Christianity, has played an outsized role in African American history and the founding of many African American organizations and institutions. Most Africans brought to the New World for enslavement were not Christians when they arrived; however, many of them and their descendants embraced Christianity, finding comfort in the biblical message of spiritual equality and deliverance (Masci, 2018). In his precedent work, McKinney (1971) noted that enslaved people received religious instruction as early as 1695. The gospel spread as enslaved people embraced the message of liberation and salvation replete in scripture. After the divison of the Black Church, Blacks formed their denominations; for example, Richard Allen headed the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The spread of Christianity fostered growing misgivings among White people, especially in the south, who feared it might fuel a desire for freedom and lead to insurrection, a fear exacerbated by the 1831 Slave Rebellion led by Nat Turner in Virginia. The rebellion led to heavy restrictions, even prohibitions, on Blacks congregating for religious services.

Consequently, they met in secrecy, alerting other slaves of their services using Negro spirituals such as "Down by the Riverside" and "Steal Away to Jesus" (McKinney, 1971). McKinney (1971) revealed that Sunday schools played an important role in encouraging learning among Blacks pre- and post-slavery. They practiced learning to read as they studied the scriptures during Sunday school. Thus, upon acquiring this essential literacy tool, they were better prepared for reading other materials and for the possibility of a path to liberation and education.

With the context of enslavement and its legacy, we can better understand how Christianity and the church became central to the Black community and their embrace of Christianity. Enslaved people related themselves to biblical characters such as Moses in the Old Testament, whom God used to emancipate his people from the Pharoah's oppression. Negro spirituals showed how Blacks related to the bondage of the Hebrews. During times of distress, Negroes would sing, "Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land. Tell O Pharaoh to let my people go." Recounting God's deliverance of the Hebrew children from the bondage of Pharaoh, expressed their hope for deliverance from the hands of their enslavers (Peacock, 2020). The literature concerning the evolution of Black's faith suggests that the enslaved even took solace in identifying with the sufferings and the spirituality of the Apostle Paul. They could say, "Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love" (*New James King Version,* 1986/2021, 2 Cor. 6:4–6).

While Moses was a foreshadowing of the coming Christ and Paul strived to model himself after Jesus Christ, both came to symbolize liberation, relief from the present evils, and a comforter familiar with their suffering and sorrow. Jesus Christ is described poetically and prophetically in Isaiah 53:2-3 (*New King James Version,* 1982/2021) in a manner that familiarizes him with their oppressed state,

> He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

The enslaved embraced faith through that familiarization. According to Peacock (2020),

Kellemen and Edwards wrote, "They viewed him as the Father of the fatherless, as the God who collects their tears in his bottle of remembrance." This kind of faith was renewed during communal worship and sustained them in hopeless situations. This kind of faith is continually activated, even into the twenty-first century. (p. 21)

The Black Church grew out of this familial faith based on a liberation theology which aligned with their experiences in the New World as descedents of the diaspora.

Afro-Diasporic Spirituality

Amid the oppression context, fictive kinship phenomena in the African American community had intentionality. Amid adversity or crisis, the God of all creation offers constant comforting communion that allows his people safe immersion in him. He desires a relationship with his people that is authentic and personal as reflected in "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (*New King James Version,* 1982/2021, James 4:8). This invitation for comfort and solace appeals to rejected and dehumanized people (Peacock, 2020). Peacock (2020) grapples with an exploratory journey concerning the significance of prayer toward spiritual growth within the African American community; threads of the practice are interwoven and dispersed within the faith community. This researcher proposes that prayer offers accessible, unfettered communication, a luxury not experienced by the enslaved.

W.E.B Dubois—The Souls of Black Folks Social Theory on Religion

Dubois's earliest writings demonstrated his faith in Christ and biblical references, yet this revered Black intellectual would turn to agnosticism in his later years, disenchanted with religion. Despite this personal transition, he still understood the importance of the Black Church, characterizing it this way (Zuckerman, 2004),

> The social life of the Negro centers in his church—baptism, wedding, and burial, gossip and courtship, friendship, and intrigue—all lie in these walls. His church is, to be sure, a social institution first and religious afterward, but its religious activity is broad and sincere in its direct moral teaching and in setting moral standards for the people. (p. 162)

Through his writing in *The Souls of Black Folks,* Dubois was regarded as the first American sociologist of religion and, most notably, the first great social theorist of race. Dubois established the premise of binding precepts within the Black church across the various denominations, including a liberation theology coupled with uplifting or human betterment in this physical world. There is a repeated theme of tying the physical and the spiritual or the practical and ethereal in Black Spirituality. Dubois summarizes it this way (Zuckerman, 2004):

> The Negro church is the peculiar and characteristic product of the transplanted African and deserves especial study. As a social group the Negro church may be said to have antedated the Negro family on American soil; as such it has preserved, on the one hand, many functions of tribal organization, and on the other hand, many of the family functions. Its tribal functions are shown in its religious activity, its social authority and general guiding and coordinating work; its family functions are shown by the fact that the church is a center of social life and intercourse; acts as newspaper and intelligence bureau, is the center of amusements—indeed, is the world in which the Negro moves and acts. So far-reaching are these functions of the church that its organization is almost political…. (p. 161)

The Black Church, the Gathering Place

The fictive kin concept of an extended church family is a well-documented facet among Black communities. Blacks' communal, spiritually formative practices remain according to Cuenca (2019), who notes,

> While some Black churches have moved outside of the communities … it is still a place where people gather to come together, and it is a safe place," Blue says. "The Black church is still a place where information and brotherhood are still shared. (para. 4)

The church sits as the community's hub, providing spiritual and practical ministry while emphasizing the notion of racial uplift through the promotion of educational programs. Churches became the community's moral conscience, bringing out the best in people, preserving the truth, and acting as catalysts for positive change. Churches present a united voice for the Black communities they serve. Black churches organized rallies and advocated from city hall to the

county square, if necessary, to speak truth to power (Cuenca, 2019). The social construct of the church and spirituality fuse with communal identity and social justice, powerfully significant in a marginalized community. Taylor et al. (2004) made clear the role of religion in African Americans' lives by noting that,

> African American theological orientations and religious practices emanated from the unique and dynamic social, political, and historical contexts that characterized their position within American society … Because Black religious expression also occurred within the context of a hostile larger society, the aims and purposes of religious belief and expression were uniquely oriented and adapted toward addressing life conditions that were deleterious to the wellbeing of African Americans. Historically, African American religious traditions have necessarily reflected the salient issues of emancipation, individual and community enfranchisement, civil and human rights, and social and economic justice. (pp. 13–14)

Faith, fictive kinship, survival, and liberation are interconnected forces as the catalysts for the Black church's role in establishing multiple outside institutions and organizations. These institutions became co-laborers in the shared vision of the culture strengthened through spirituality, the activism of social justice, and the veneration of education as the levers for racial uplift. Spirituality throughout this study has numerous terms used interchangeably or in a manner that suggests their equivalency, for example, spiritual formation, spiritual growth, spiritual direction, or discipleship. They each have distinct definitions, while interrelated as aspects of the transformative process of Christian spiritual formation. Tang (2021) provides this clarification by noting, Christian Spirituality is the process of spiritual formation of a disciple of Jesus Christ for an authentic and fulfilled Christian life in the present world, involving bringing together the fundamental tenets of the Christian truths and the experience of living in God's presence, grace, and love in our daily life. It is Trinitarian, incarnational, and grace-filled living. It is *theology in action*. (para. 2) Hence our spirituality begins with God. It begins with a divine call, rebirth, and conversion (John 3:3-8; Acts 2:38-39) and continues with sanctification or spiritual formation. It

requires divine grace and our willing **cooperation**. It involves our inner and outward lives. It involves the integration of our lives as the Holy Spirit is restoring us. The goal is to become more like Christ (Eph 4:13-16). (Para. 6)

African American spirituality as a discipline focuses on how social and cultural experiences of a distinctive group influence their spiritual growth process and thus their spiritual formation. This researcher asserts that it should be considered part of a broader ecological understanding of Christian spiritual formation, not separate from but inclusive. Chandler (2017) observed that African American spirituality provides a rich lens into the heart and soul of the Black church experience, often overlooked in the Christian spiritual formation (p. 159). According to Chandler (2017),

> African American spirituality focuses on two primary areas: the first addresses African American spirituality through the shaping quality of history. The second is a perspective on selected spiritual practices that have shaped African American spirituality, including the community of faith and prayer and community outreach. (pp. 160–161)

African Diasporic Spirituality Worldview

Feelings (1995) remarks, "If religion is broadly understood as the quest for God through ritual, belief, and practice, then African American spirituality may be understood as the answer to God in our midst" (p. 9). The transcendent forces in society that exert influence on all society's members, albeit for good or evil, are called supra-personal. Expressly put, supra-personal forces in the moral world, through their authority over their members and their influence in public social life, are vastly more complex, powerful, and enduring than are individuals, as Rauschenbusch remarked (as cited in Smith, 1999). According to Smith (1999), Black people's spirituality remains influenced by this historic worldview:

> This concept of supra-personal forces is necessary for understanding radical good and radical evil. Radical evil is extreme cruelty concentrated disproportionately on specific

groups, resulting in long-term, transgenerational suffering. Radical good may be understood as a sustaining force and a creative and beneficial response to radical evil, and African American spirituality emerged as a creative response to that radical evil. (p. 47)

Therefore, understanding that "radical evil" was ruthless in its longevity with unparalleled suffering has been far-reaching, marking an entire group of people as chattel and innately inferior. Acknowledging that spiritual formation cannot be segregated from physical, social existence in this physical world, and it cannot understand the soul of America or African American spirituality apart from it. DuBois (1903) summarizes this duality by noting that:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, -an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (pp.16-17)

Countering radical evil is the radical good manifested, for example, through the uniquely Afro-diasporic influenced creative forms of spirituality found in Black music. Kirk-Duggan (2000) noted, "Such musical poetry touches and unleashes the communal and individual stories of the heart and soul that provide insights into how an oppressed people coped and retained a hopeful imagination toward human transformation" (p. 152).

Black Women of Faith Forge the Way Forward

Black Christians share church as the base of the community in emphasizing Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the community of believers, personal salvation experience, and freedom. However, the additional dynamic of the shared experience of ethnicity creates the distinctions. Similarly, even beyond ethnicity, Black women's unique experience has manifested in creative expressions of identity as spiritual beings navigating a physically and emotionally challenging realm, "Among the earliest frameworks of African American women's self-actualization was a sense of belonging and identity, informed by a commonly shared African ethos, maintaining the

interconnectedness of secular and sacred" (West, 2020, p. 426). As with early African Americans, likewise within today's culture, one's place in the community constitutes a spiritual belonging—one's soul, one's humanity, confirmed through the community. Although many discussions of spirituality inevitably engage religiosity even interchangeably using terminology like religion, faith, or spirituality, they are different, as noted by Reed and Neville (2013),

> Religiosity is typically defined in terms of an individual's participation in religious institutions and adherence to prescribed beliefs. Spirituality, on the other hand, involves meaning-making and relational dimensions, such as having a relationship with a higher power and being connected with other people and the universe. (pp. 386-387)

A research study showed that spirituality, not religion, is critical to Black women's well-being. Tamara Reed and Helen Neville conducted an internet survey of 160 Black women that explored their religious and spiritual values and practices. They found that 79 percent of participants reported they were "fairly to very spiritual." In terms of religious affiliation, more than 82 percent were Christian (mostly Baptist) (Reed & Neville, 2013). The researchers noted that their participants ranged in age from 20 to 75 years. However, more than 60 percent of participants held graduate or professional degrees and identified themselves as middle class (Reed & Neville, 2013). Their population sample of Christian women denotes an additional trend within the Black community that contrasts with trends in other ethnic demographics concerning education, income levels, and religiosity (Pew Research Center, 2020a). Highly educated Americans are less inclined than others to say they believe in God and pray daily. When asked about their religious identity, college graduates are more likely than others to describe themselves as atheists or agnostics (Pew Research Center, 2020). While 22% of Americans 65 and over are White evangelicals, the number is just 7% for those between 18 and 29. The Reed

and Neville (2013) study population is demographically like this study. According to findings

compiled in a study by the National Center for Education Statistics (2016),

> Black women have been obtaining degrees at a consistently high rate for the last eight
> years and counting. Information collected about the higher education among African
> Americans between 2009 and 2010 shows that Black women accounted for 68 percent of
> associate degrees, 66 percent of bachelor's degrees, 71 percent of master's degrees, and
> 65 percent of doctorate degrees awarded to Black students during that time frame. (para.
> 2-3)

The dual approach to spirituality as both secular and sacred is a precept that emanates

from an Afro-diasporic spiritual worldview. The Black church as a central institution in the

community is a logical springboard for racial uplift; consequently, there are connections between

education and high rates of religious affiliation. The connection between faith in the Black

community as a survival coping mechanism clarifies how and why the church wields tremendous

influence and eludes to how they are individually and collectively cope within their environment.

This discussion employs both awareness levels necessary for a complete picture of BGLO

members' spiritual growth.

The Societal Context Impacting Black Women's Spirituality

The most significant difference to remember when comparing Black women's spiritual

growth with others is that Black women deal with three levels of oppression: racism, sexism, and

classism. These factors influence their personal and corporate spiritually formative process. This

reality of a triple oppression reveals what Natarajan (2022) discusses as "intersectionality."

Under the umbrella of feminism is womanism which has distinctions from feminism derived

from tenets of Black Feminist Thought. Womanism is not solely concerned with gender equity;

instead, the emphasis is on gender reconciliation as women of color seek to persevere against

damages to a fragile familial dynamic resulting from racism (Natarajan, 2022). Lawrence, an

American writer and poet, once remarked that the future of humanity would be decided not by relations between nations but by relations between women and men. The concept of gender reconciliation highlights the simple idea that both men and women suffer gender injustice, and each needs the other for healing (Natarajan, 2022, para. 12). This unifying notion aligns with the earlier suppositions discussed by Pettit (2008) when he addresses the relational reconciliatory nature of God. We know from Scripture that God ultimately brings about complete healing through the work of his Son, Jesus Christ.

BFT Womanism as a Coping Mechanism against Micro and Macro Aggression

Finding and applying theoretical constructs that are appropriate for explaining and understanding the experiences of African American women that address issues like micro and macro aggression can be challenging (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 19). According to Graham (2016),

> The high spiritual and religious nature of Black women is well documented in the social sciences, yet the transpersonal field yields very little discourse on this relevant nexus. This static void is representative of the macro and microaggressions that Black women face routinely in the Western world, perpetually diminishing and nullifying their collective character and lived experiences. The ostracism Black women face regularly stems primarily from the triple threat of racism, sexism, and socioeconomic status, thereby stimulating the inherent use of spiritual practices as a form of resiliency. (p. 106).

In a study of Black women, Mattis (2002) distinguished spirituality from religiosity, finding that for her participants, "Spirituality refers to an individual's relationship to and with the sacred and transcendent nature of life, the manifestation of a sense of connectedness with others (e.g., humans, spirits, and God), and in a quest for goodness" (p. 310). Together these themes demonstrate a secular spirituality as a concomitant with self-preservation. The research design Mattis (2002) adopts is a culturally specific theoretical research paradigm to reduce invisibility and marginalization. Foremost, considerations in selecting a research method must work in

tandem with the participants' lived experiences (Lewis, 2008). The micro and macro aggressions that impact Invisibility, Outsider Within Syndrome, and Intersectionality phenomena are frequently experienced by the population sample, which consists of Black, educated, middle-class women who primarily navigate life in predominantly White spaces (Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

Invisibility and Outsider Within Syndrome

Outsider Within Syndrome. Forming an educated Black middle class from the halls of HBCUs introduced a new obstacle for Black women who struggle to have their voices heard at the academic table or the study halls of theologians. While education has provided some access to board rooms and the halls of academia, Black women remain outsiders in the social networks that perpetuate promotion and power in those circles (Sapp, 2016). Black women are taught and told via dominant discourses that their lived experiences are insignificant or biased. However, they have also learned hard lessons about the consequences of speaking our truths to power, often being silenced or being labeled angry (Griffin, 2012).

Furthermore, as an example, many Black female scholars struggle to achieve real scholar status as academics whose work is widely published, read, respected, and celebrated (Davis, 1999; Hendrix, 2002, 2005, 2010). Black academics are often concerned with publishing race-related research and often receive accusations of self-interest, narcissism, and vendetta (Calafell & Moreman, 2009; Hendrix, 2005, 2010; Orbe et al., 2010) as cited in Griffin (2012). These concerns are descriptive of the effect of Outsider Within syndrome. Gold (2008) provides a scenario on post-secondary campuses in a narrative study:

> Despite the efforts of well-meaning department chairs, many of whom in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities are Caucasian, professors and students often fail to understand the burden of being in different places on non-white faculty. Incidents of

covert racism and racial insensitivity, which are apparent to African American faculty, are often invisible to members of the white majority or are perceived as outsiders within. (p. 12)

The sense that perceptions faced by non-whites go unrecognized or even acknowledged segues the following form of microaggression: invisibility. As the study pursues a discussion around the spiritual growth of a relatively unknown segment of a Black culture focused particularly on Black women, it is essential to identify invisbility, which enters the research discussion on its own merits as an explorable phenomenon in lived experiences of Black women.

Invisibility. The American Psychological Association defines Invisibility Syndrome as the following (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000):

They propose that African Americans' adaptive behavior and psychological well-being can be affected by personal experiences of perceived prejudice and discrimination. Encountering repeated racial slights can create a feeling of not being seen as a person of worth. This subjective sense of psychological invisibility forms a struggle with feelings and beliefs that personal talents, abilities, and character are not acknowledged or valued by others, nor by the larger society, because of racial prejudice. The "invisibility syndrome" is offered here as a conceptual model for understanding the intrapsychic processes and outcomes in managing the personal stress arising from racial slights and the subjective experience of invisibility among African Americans. (p. 33)

Many Black women sought to grapple with these injustices as part of the Women's movement. Black women in the 1960s who turned to the feminist movement faced racism. It generally took the form of exclusion. Black women were conspicuously absent on conference panels or discussions unrelated to race. In most women's movement writings, white, middle-class women's experiences were described as universal, mainly ignoring the differences in Black women's experiences due to race and class. According to Hull et al. (2018), well-known Black women also grapple with tokenism, their white counterparts framing their work with the dismissive pattern of representing "the" Black experience. Black women felt an overwhelming frustration at the white feminist's unwillingness to address their participation in perpetuating

racism. White feminists asserted that those who experience oppression could not oppress others. The result is that from a historical perspective, Black Feminist theory has carved out its separate niche (Hull et al., 2018). In the context of a societal environment interacting with the dynamics of these syndromes and the influences of the fictive kinship, Black Spirituality, the Black Church, and HBCUs would become the catalyst for BGLOs. Sapp (2016) highlights that Black woman have developed several coping mechanisms in response to their social environment.

One coping mechanism is participation in uplifting spiritual activities which can be leaned on when dealing with negative messages or circumstances experienced in society. Similarly, Howard-Hamilton (2003) stresses Black women's need to create counter spaces to combat the "outsider-within" syndrome. Many Black women have Sister Circles, auxiliary groups, and BGLOs which all could be counter spaces. HBCU campuses are examples of counter spaces. Wolf-Wendel (1998) suggested that Black women succeed at HBCUs due to the support and mentorship relationships they receive from Black faculty, staff, students, and the community. HBCUs provide spaces conducive to personal, social, and academic success (Wolf-Wendel, 1998; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2000; Zamani, 2003). HBCUs are the perfect breeding ground for developing other counter spaces that directly equip Black women emotionally and spiritually in the safety of the community.

HBCUs Establishing the Levers for Racial Uplift

Before the Civil War, few universities espoused the mission and goal of training and educating Black people. Lincoln University and Cheyney University in Pennsylvania, and Wilberforce University in Ohio, were the only viable options for "free" Black men and women who wished to pursue a college education (Gasman & Tudico, 2008). The church's outreach

established most HBCUs with the Freedman's Bureau. For example, Atlanta's Spelman Seminary, which later became Spelman College, received early support from the Woman's American Baptist Home Mission Society (Laubach, 2007). Churches such as the American Missionary Association, the Disciples of Christ, and the Methodist Episcopal Church founded religious education and training colleges, including Dillard University, Tugaloo College, and Talladega College (Redd, 1998).

HBCUs are institutions established before 1964 during legal segregation with a mission to provide Black Americans with quality post-secondary education. These institutions were often the only educational opportunity afforded by Blacks (New America, 2015). Although many began as predominantly private schools, public HBCU growth expanded with the Morrill Act of 1890, which prohibited the distribution of money to states that made distinctions of race in admissions unless they also established at least one land-grant college for Black Americans. This act resulted in nineteen Black public colleges (Lee & Keys, 2013).

HBCU Christian Origins

HBCU founders were primarily abolitionist missionaries, Northern philanthropists, and the African Methodist Episcopal Church. They wanted to Christianize Blacks and train them for industrial enterprises. In 1866, the United Methodist Church collaborated with the Freedman's Aid Society, establishing 70 new schools by 1882 (Hawkins, 2012). HBCUs, like Howard University and five others, were initially theological seminaries. The Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania in a study on the changing demographics at HBCUs as cited by Gasman (2013) reported,

> Education and worship have always been closely intertwined in the Black community Keels points out. Believers met in secret in remote areas, hush harbors, far from prying eyes. They hosted whispered worship services where they would gather—at great risk—

in order to honor God and encourage one another. These whispered gatherings, Keels explains, served as a "springboard into planning for Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Black folks know that the origins [of HBCUs] began in faith and that faith became the primary reason for learning. (para. 2)

The Impact of HBCUs on Racial Uplift

Black Southerners achieved a literacy rate of 55% despite the continued obstacles and violence by 1890. Black Americans repeatedly proved willing to defy oppressive efforts to pursue their education (Bracey, 2017). In the 21st century, Black families continue to show their determination to provide their children with the best education possible; as Hamilton et al. (2015) showed, Black families outspend White families on education as a percentage of household income and net worth. Until the mid-1960s, HBCUs were, with very few exceptions, the only higher education option for most African Americans, and HBCUs are a uniquely American institution. The Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, defines an HBCU as a Black college or university that was established and accredited (or making progress toward accreditation) before 1964 and whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans. The Civil Rights Movement's push for integration heralded a drop in enrollment at HBCUs and their role in educating nearly all the Black middle class. Gasman (2013) reports that "today the 105 HBCUs enroll 11% of Black students in the United States, yet they represent less than 3% of colleges and universities" (p. 5). Despite the decline in enrollment, a perception that HBCUs offer Black students something beyond just an academic experience persists; thus, HBCUs serve as an incubator for organizations and leaders dedicated to the community.

HBCUs Fictive Kin Educational Approach

The seminal summation on HBCU's supportive environment was addressed in Fleming's (1984) influential comparative study. It was noted that:

> She deemed HBCUs a supportive environment in which (a) students have many opportunities for friendship with peers, faculty, staff, and counselors beyond the classroom; (b) students are free to engage in extracurricular campus life, including satisfying positive power motives and holding leadership positions; and (c) students feel a climate of academic development so that "an individual can achieve feelings of progress. (p. 19)

The significant elements coalesce to create fertile ground for achievement or racial uplift, fictive kinship, and a solid commitment to a communal consciousness, all elements influenced by the church and reinforced by BGLOs.

Education central to Racial Uplift. HBCUs uniquely contribute to achievement. Researchers (Gallien & Peterson, 2005) contend that HBCUs differ in teaching by incorporating traditional learning and culturally relevant pedagogy (Boykin, 1983; Watkins, 2005), a pedagogy that places a heavy emphasis on a collegiate experience that is familial.

Fictive Kin Pedagogy. HBCU campuses reflect an atmosphere where emphasis on racial/ethnic, intellectual, and leadership is fostered among students. Leadership cultivation is one of the most salient contributions from HBCUs. Jean-Marie (as cited by Arroyo and Gasman, 2014) reported that Black female HBCU leaders "regarded students as children of the community who are to be nurtured, groomed, and prayed for as leaders of the next generation" (p. 68). Many southern Black women leaders at these HBCUs view their vocations as service to God and the community (Jean-Marie, as cited in Arroyo and Gasman, 2014). There are currently 25 women presidents of the nation's 100 HBCUs, according to the Thurgood Marshall College Fund and the United Negro College Fund (Dillion, 2019, para 3). While Black women in leadership are on the rise at HBCUs, their numbers hardly reflect that over 62% of HBCU enrollment is female (Herder, 2021). Despite the disparity in statistical representation, they noted that Black women leaders' influence had strengthened collaboration. The historic Extraordinary

Reach Event hosted at Florida A&M University brought five presidents together for a forum; FAMU Black Archives research associate Murrell Dawson felt inspired and proud to see women with so much power (Graham, 2019). Dawson remarked (as cited in Graham, 2019),

> I am still excited. This was so historical to see the power, to see the compassion, to see the wisdom, and to see the spiritual connection that these women had with each other," Dawson said. "I am proud of FAMU at this moment. I can tell that the best is yet to come because we're growing some college presidents right now.(para. 9-10)

The overlapping connections between BGLO membership and HBCUs exist among these women leaders. For instance, the current Supreme Basileus (president) of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated (Dr. Glenda Glover) is president of Tennessee State University. Alpha Kappa Alpha's motto is service to all mankind, placing community service at the center of the sorority's mission.

Communal consciousness. The final element in the HBCU educational approach is the engraining of a communal consciousness. HBCUs' attempt to cultivate a set of moral principles is grounded in Christianity stemming from HBCUs' religious roots. The traditional HBCU value system combines conservative and progressive components. Progressivism is most evident in HBCUs' emphasis on "social peace" (Ricard & Brown, 2008). Although the quintessential PWI focuses solely on research and scholarship, the typical HBCU also sets its sights on incorporating societal change (Sydnor et al., 2010). The implicit concept is that students share in the communal aspiration to progress.

HBCUs' commitment to creating community leaders dedicated to racial uplift and social justice has solidified their significance in improving the Black community. HBCUs have produced some of the most notable leaders of the civil rights movement, including Medgar Evers (Alcorn State), Rosa Parks (Alabama State), Stokely Carmichael (Howard University), and Dr.

Martin Luther King, Jr. (Morehouse College) (HBCU Lifestyle, 2014). The matriculation of these icons at HBCUs directly impacted their advocacy. Hicks-Tafari et al. (2016) state,

> Social justice advocacy engages values that reflect a person's inner beliefs. The professors emphasized that now, more than ever, each student must comprehend what it means to be a social justice advocate: someone who incorporates an embodied understanding of concepts such as justice, equality, diversity, and advocacy into his/her daily walk. (p. 19)

Origins of Black Greek Letter Sororities at HBCUs

The origins of BGLOs primarily on HBCU campuses in the early twentieth century connected these two institutions and their shared influences from the church. BGLOs' desire was to create organizations geared towards brotherhood/sisterhood for Black students on campuses and post-graduation. These organizations are different from their white counterparts' organizations because the BGLOs were explicitly created by and for racial minorities to uplift the Black community. Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Incorporated and Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Incorporated were the first two National Pan-Hellenic Council organizations to address the racism and prejudices Blacks faced from the administration at Cornell University and Indiana University, respectively. Although Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Incorporated, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Incorporated, and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Incorporated were founded on the campuses of HBCUs, they all faced similar experiences of racial discrimination (Allison, 2016). Floyd as cited by Allison in 2016 argued that "Black Greek fraternities were instrumental in the founding and expansion of Black Greek sororities" (p. 21). Like Black fraternity members, Black women founded sororities and fostered sisterhood to combat racism and challenge women's traditional roles [sexism] Giddings (as cited in Allison, 2016).

In 1908, the first Black Greek Letter sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated, was formed. Confined to what she called "a small, circumscribed life" in the segregated and male-dominated milieu that characterized the early 1900s, Howard University co-ed Ethel Hedgeman dreamt of creating a support network for Black women. It was where women with like minds came together to mutually uplift and coalesce their talents and strengths for the benefit of others (Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., 2020). These young women were considered exceptional, as college education was not easily accessible for African Americans in this period. They were subject to rejection within mainstream society because of their skin color while grappling with sexism within and outside their communities—a phenomenon now labeled intersectionality. The creation of these sororities as support systems mirrors the corporate template established by the Black church and at HBCUs, strengthening the horizontal and vertical ties known as sisterhood (Johnson, n.d.). Collins (2000) found that "Black women's strategies of everyday resistance to the systemic marginalization have largely consisted of trying to create spheres of influence authority and power within institutions that traditionally have allowed Blacks and women little formal authority or real power" (p. 146). In the same vein, Floyd (2009) remarked, "They met the needs and advanced the agenda of Black women on college campuses for individual survival and racial uplift" (p. 23).

Related Literature Considering Counterviews of BGLOs

Dr. Ali D. Chambers, assistant professor of African American Studies at Claflin University, whose research concentrates on the historical and cultural impact of the Black Greek Letter Organizations, is considered an authority on BGLOs. Dr. Chambers' work on the failure of BGLOs has received widespread acknowledgment and acceptance, published in *The London School of Economics Journal and American Politics and Policy*. Chambers (2017) asserts that,

> Although the BGLO had the specific aim of liberating the Black community from inferior positions as second-class citizens, many viewed these organizations as a means for the Black bourgeoisie to create and maintain privileged status and recognition within the Black community. (p. 631)

Chambers (2017) claims that Black Greek-Letter Organizations have included secret meetings, selective membership, and a preference for lighter-complexioned members. Moreover, Black Greek-Letter Organizations have allowed Black elites to create a separate privileged society, which enabled these organizations to perpetuate the vicious cycle of racial prejudice and White supremacy (Chambers, 2019).

Author Deborah Whaley delves into the complex and sensitive issue of colorism and privilege in BGLOs, notably Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA). Whaley (2010) shares that Norma Boyd, one of the founders of the AKA sorority, felt that her role and others like her with fairer skin who were educated, and wealthy, and have been allowed a foot in both worlds, Black and White.[7]

Boyd considered herself a spy in the world of Whites declaring that she would "come back and report just how the other half does" so that the "darker people of the race" could strategize with them against the perceived enemy within the dominant culture (p. 23). Boyd's statement reflects the beliefs of some Blacks that their equality and assimilation into America was conditional, and their acceptance was dependent on the acceptance of Christianity, participation in the military, acceptance of republican or democratic principles, and economic

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[7] Passing is a process by which an individual crosses over from one culture or community into another undetected. The historical connotation of the term, however, is intimately connected with Black America, and "passing," "crossing over," or "going over to the other side" typically refers to a Black person whose appearance is such that they can pass for white (Sociology of Race, 2017)

development. The previous factors encapsulate a "be like us" theory of equality: Blacks would be equal to whites when they became like whites (Pierce, 2009). The impact of colorism remains a continuing detrimental factor within the Black community.

Arguments For and Against Relevance of BGLO Sororities

What is Needed to Remain Relevant? In two articles from 2014, both sides of the argument concerning the relevance of BGLO sororities proposed five reasons on either side (DeGregory, 2014). DeGregory lays out five critical issues BGLO sororities need to address to remain relevant. She states, sororities need to share their complete narrative of service and excellence, which can overshadow if someone's only exposure is to paraphernalia and stepping. DeGregory further states that as Black women, there needs to be more inter-organizational cooperation between Black sororities. She explains there needs to be efforts to discourage increasingly popular misogynistic behavior between Black sororities. Not only is it mean-spirited, but it is also self-demeaning. New members must be taught decorum and maintain a standard of ladylike excellence rather than mimicking the fraternities. She suggests that BGLO members need to serve as role models to counter Black women's negative Images. Finally she recommends a zero-tolerance for violators of hazing policy. DeGregory (2014) concludes that these Black sororities increasingly face questions about their relevance. Black sorority members must be ready and willing and confront these challenges comprehensively and convincingly.

Why BGLOs are Still Relevant. In response to DeGregory's (2015) article, Dr. Felecia Commodore lays out her arguments in the affirmative of BGLOs. She describes the current need for more diverse representations of Black women in media than hypersexualized or hyperviolent depictions. Counterspace where unabashed, unapologetic, public celebration of Black women and Black womanhood exist unimpeded by marginalization. Black sororities provide that space.

Dr. Commodore declares Black sororities have shaped and built Black women leaders for over 100 years, for many years, Black sororities were one of few spaces, Black women could have formalized leadership positions. She acknowledges that there have been arguments that Black sororities are bastions of elitism. Moreover, though members may hold elitist attitudes within any organization, one could argue that Black sororities have served as a great equalizer for many who join. In these organizations, young Black women who may have never crossed paths find themselves deeply interacting and making meaningful connections. She continues by explaining that these organizations wield some solid economic and political power. Aside from the various elected and appointed government offices held by members, sheer strength in numbers, ability to mobilize, and interconnectedness have the power to shift policies and shine a light on policies and legislation that could prove harmful to Black women and the communities to which they are connected. Dr. Commodore concludes no matter what sorority colors one rocks or what letters you hold dear to your heart, one thing lies at the very core of each of these organizations—service. The spirit of service in these organizations' DNA fuels the desire to act on that spirit of giving, helping, and uplifting. Connecting with like-minded women who value service and share core principles and beliefs is connected to that service. All four NPHC organizations have NGO status with the United Nations, allowing them to perform various service and humanitarian functions globally.

Rationale for the Study

This researcher asserts that spiritual formation is progressive and cyclical (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). The inner workings of the Holy Spirit encompass all aspects of believers' lives (*New King James Version,* 1986/2021, John 14:15-17, 25-26, Acts 4:32, Rom. 8:14-17 & Col. 2:11). The progression evidenced through social justice activism, community outreach, and

cultural identity can impact spiritual growth. This phenomenological study aimed to explore

spiritual growth among Christian BGLO sorority members through their active engagement with

other Christians within their BGLO. The intention was to explore the overlapping and

interconnected phenomena of spiritual formation to gain a holistic understanding of the

communal, spiritually formative process among Christian BGLO members outside the traditional

church walls. The research design centered around Black women's lived experiences derived

from their accounts, a research approach inspired by womanist theologian Katie Canon, who is

staunch in her advocacy of BFT. Canon remarked on the salience of Black women in taking

ownership of their research (as cited in Floyd-Thomas, 2019),

> The ability to unmask, debunk, and disentangle the ideologies, theologies, and systems of value operative in a particular society. Analyzing the established power relationships that determine cultural, political, and economic presuppositions and evaluating the legitimating myths that sanction the enforcement of such values. In order that we may become responsible decision-makers who envision structural and systemic alternatives that embrace the well-being of us all. (p. 102)

There remains a persistent deficit of diverse perspectives in academic research

scholarship, particularly among women of color. The old cliché holds that representation matters.

According to Floyd-Thomas (2019),

> Even traditional methods of scholarship have not been applied to Black women and might therefore yield actual results, yet untraditional methods might be the only way to proceed in a field where there is barely any published data to consult. (p. 25)

This notable absence in the research literature and scholarship presents an opportunity for

understanding spiritual formation from a statistically significant observant Christian

demographic in America. A qualitative phenomenological design draws data from interviews

based on lived experiences. The interviews were the primary sources, firsthand accounts of the

phenomenon studied. This design avoids what Mowatt et al. (2013) referred to as the abhorred nature of these disparities that move us beyond an "add race and stir" approach to research.

Gap in the Literature

This study represents a shift in the current discourse on BGLOs and their impact on the Black community. Past BGLO studies have left the discussion one-sided, with women's voices remaining marginalized. Kimbrough (2003) determined that the literature on NPHC organizations (The Divine Nine), especially Black sororities, is limited to an ancillary subtopic with researchers often lumping Black men and women together as one group, not noting their different experiences (White, 1999). Moreover, research concerning BGLOs is a burgeoning field of academic study that should drive inquiry, considering that these organizations have existed for a century. As noted by Allen (2013), few scholars have examined NPHC organizations (The Divine Nine) specifically and given little attention to institutional types like HBCUs. Investigation of the role of BGLO sororities and spirituality is virtually nonexistent. The lack of research on spiritual formation among Black women represents a glaring gap in the literature, considering the statistical data that Black women stand out for their high religious commitment and faith. Due to the secretive nature of BGLOs concerning their rituals and practices, many mainstream scholars have not adequately studied the groups (Hughey & Hernandez, 2013). Although BGLOs have a significant role in Black communities, with considerable and notable members (Stewart, 2008) and combined memberships of over 1.6 million, research on BGLOs remains sparse. This study presents a fresh lens for further research on corporate, spiritually formative practices among Christians, specifically Black women, outside of the traditional setting of the church. It examines how the Holy Spirit performs his

transformative work in secular settings using all aspects of a believer's life in an ecological approach to fulfill divine purpose.

Profile of the Current Study

Chapter Two of this research dissertation has reviewed the historical and Christian origins of BGLOs connected to HBCUs and the church. The researcher also addressed the evolution of systemic societal racism as a catalyst for Black Spirituality and the Black church. This background explains the necessity for Black women to create spaces where they could counter the intersectionality of racism, sexism, and economic marginalization through the community. This chapter examined church communal spirituality in the form of community uplift, education, spiritual growth, and social advocacy, and how BGLO sorority initiatives align with spiritual formation in the community. In Chapter Three, the research study discusses a hermeneutic phenomenological approach that recognizes the participants' lifeworld and the study's objective in describing and interpreting the data.

Conclusions

This literature review had two objectives primarily to provide a broad context for the reader in terms of understanding of Black Greek Letter Organization sororities with the awareness that there may be limited familiarity outside of the Black community. Secondly, the review laid out an approach that incorporated awareness of the push and pull factors intricate to examining the phenomenon of spiritual formation occurring in a secular setting with other Christians within the historical, social, and racial factors involved. So, while there are many factors to consider, the focus is centered on the lived experiences of spiritual growth as Christian Black women and BGLO members.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a phenomenological qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of Christian sorority members actively engaged with other Christians in Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs) and how that impacts their spiritual growth. This chapter describes the study's research methodology and design, including the setting, the participants, the ethical considerations of the research, data collection, and data analysis methods. The primary data collection method for this research was interviewing. This section describes how these interviews were conducted, transcribed, and coded to find emergent themes from the data. Another aspect of this chapter is the discussion on the overall trustworthiness of the research. Finally, this section includes a discussion on Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the necessary steps to get full approval from the IRB prior to executing the study.

Research Design Synopsis

This section provides an overview of the research design elaborating on the research problem and purpose of the study's inquiry and the proposed methodology.

The Problem

There are contrasting views regarding Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs). Their existence has profoundly impacted the Black community as organizations that foster leadership, philanthropy, fictive kinship, and education (Debose, 2018; Dubois, 1930; Herndon & Hirt, 2004). However, BGLOs' status as community leaders or representatives of Christian values has come under increasing criticism. Recent incidents of illegal hazing that led to tragic deaths, accusations of pagan rituals, and accusations of colorism, which are subversive to Black unity, have caused many to question the role of BGLOs in the Black community (Chambers, 2019;

Williams, 2016). Amid this conflict, some members of BGLOs contend that the organizations are not venues for Christian members to live out positive Christian spiritual formative practices.

The description Teo (2017) outlines for the phases of spiritual formation is a framework for assessing the often intangible, transformational objective: "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" in (*New King James Version*, 1982/2021, 2 Cor. 3:18 The thesis guiding this research is that active engagement with other Christians in community or corporate activities positively influences spiritual maturation among Christian sorority members. Focusing on one segment of the BGLO population (women), the study sought to understand the impact of active engagement in a BGLO sorority on Christian members' spiritual growth. The intentional and interactive modeling of Christlike love for one another in fellowship and outreach is in praxis the ministry of the Holy Spirit's work of maturation among believers, beyond the church walls. This study has the potential to broaden conversations about how spiritual growth can occur in a variety of settings and can be cultivated in diverse communities in ways that are culturally familiar and therefore influence the church's call for kingdom building.

Purpose Statement

This phenomenological study explored how active engagement with other Christians in a Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO) sorority impacts the spiritual growth of its Christian members. One of the subsidiary issues explored is the influence of relationships within their sororities that may impact their journeys as Christians striving to become Christ-like; it is the will of God for all believers (*King James New Version*,1982/2021, 2 Cor. 3:18). The definition of Christian spiritual formation has evolved from the traditional Catholic emphasis on the

disciplines of prayer, Bible reading, and fasting (Sheldrake, as cited in Teo, 2017). For this

study, these disciplines help evaluate spiritually beneficial formative practices with which the

participants identified. Willard (2002) noted that spiritual formation could occur for every person

regardless of religious faith. He believed that every human spirit is formed either by the spiritual

realm or by the sociocultural factors surrounding the person. Willard (2002) draws the distinction

that Christian spiritual formation requires being a Christian. Wilhoit (as cited in Teo, 2017) has

expressed similar views; he stated that a person forms either positively or negatively, and the

formational process takes place constantly throughout one's life. Among current authoritative

Christian academics, Christian spiritual formation extends beyond these disciplines (Teo, 2017).

Palmer (as cited in Teo) listed three areas shaping one's spiritual formation: "the study of sacred

texts, the practice of prayer and contemplation, and the gathered life of the community itself" (p.

55). These disciplines frame the research questions, and in particular, the area of community or

corporate engagement. An element of community in spiritual formation is the corporate

engagement involved in loving one another. It involves taking inventory of believers' walk of

faith with God while healthily forming meaningful communal relationships with others (Von

Gunter, 2021). For this study, community engagement, as evidenced through active engagement

in a BGLO's missional outreach in selfless service to others, operating in grace, and sorority

corporate engagement were examined to address Christian spiritual maturation. Additionally, the

study examined corporate engagement through communal, spiritually formative practices among

members.

     The central focus of this study was the aspect of spiritually formative practices in the

community experienced by Christian sorority members and members' active engagement, which

impacts their spiritual growth. According to Tang (as cited in Teo, 2017), the goals of spiritual

formation include the following: first, believers are transformed into Christlikeness on the personal or individual level; then, believers evidence that transformation as they mature as a people of God through community engagement; lastly, believers engage in the work of establishing and expanding the Kingdom of God at the missional level through outreach and service, among other things. Teo describes spiritual growth leading to maturation, evidenced by missional concern. Zscheile (2012) suggests that the "missional church views mission as definitive of what the church is because the church is a product of and participant in God's mission" (p. 6). Therefore, missions constituted evidence of the transformative objective of Christlikeness affirmed in Matthew 20:28. Missional community outreach is a central activity in BGLOs; how then is their participation in missional outreach an outward expression of their spiritual formation progression toward maturation (Teo, 2017, para. 9-10)?

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1. In what way are Christian spiritual practices manifested among actively engaged members of BGLO sororities?

Subsidiary question: How often do you practice the spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, silence, meditation, and service to others with Christian members of your sorority

Subsidiary question: What is the frequency of your active engagement in mutually beneficial Christian formation with Christian members of your sorority?

RQ2. How has active engagement in a BGLO sorority influenced Christian members' spiritual growth?

Subsidiary question: How has active engagement in the sorority positively influenced your spiritual growth?

Subsidiary question: How has active engagement in your sorority deepened your relationship with God?

RQ3. How do the activities or initiatives of the sorority that these members engage in contribute to the spiritual formation of a Christian sorority sister?

Subsidiary question: How has your active engagement in your sorority positively influenced another Christian sorority member's spiritual growth?

Subsidiary question: How has your active engagement in your sorority been shared with other Christians outside of the sorority?

RQ4. How has engagement in community service and social justice with other Christian sorority members influenced your spiritual growth?

Subsidiary question: How has active participation in community service activities with other Christian sorority members influenced your Christian spiritual formation?

Subsidiary question: How has active participation in social justice projects with other Christian sorority members influenced your Christian spiritual formation?

Research Design and Methodology

This qualitative research study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach, focusing on the commonality of a lived experience within a particular group. This approach's fundamental goal is to describe the nature of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research relies on firsthand observations, interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, participant observations, recordings made in natural settings, documents, and artifacts obtained by the researcher. The data is generally non-numerical. Qualitative methods include ethnography, grounded theory, discourse analysis, and interpretative phenomenological analysis (Creswell, 2014). They use qualitative research methods from the social sciences and educational research (Alasuutari, 2010). Several branches of philosophy have influenced contemporary qualitative research, such as positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, and constructivism (Denzin et al., 2005).

In historical context, although the origins of phenomenology trace back to Kant and Hegel, Husserl is widely regarded as "the fountainhead of phenomenology in the twentieth century" (Vandenberg, 1997, p. 11). However, its roots are reactionary to capitalism's

disintegrating ideologies and traditional values following World War I; the result was rampant

relativism and a sense that civilization had lost its bearings. Husserl rejected the belief that

objects in the external world exist independently and that information about objects is reliable.

He argued that people could only be sure of how things appear or present themselves to their

consciousness (Eagleton, 1983; Fouche, 1993). Certainty arrived at by anything outside direct

experience must be ignored, and in this way, the external world must reduce to the content of

personal consciousness. Thus, Husserl treated realities as pure phenomena and the only absolute

data from where to begin. Husserl called his philosophical method "phenomenology," or the

science of pure phenomena (Eagleton, 1983, p. 55). From a Christian perspective,

phenomenology cannot be equivalent to philosophical or historical phenomenology. It is

grounded in scripture, notably distinguishing between the kingdom and the world because it

centers around the teachings of Jesus. Hart (2014) makes clear,

> That phenomenology as he understands it, is not purely a philosophical approach or
> method. Pointing out that phenomenology "teaches us not to concede that philosophy, as
> a historical discourse, has the right to establish the final meaning of any experience or
> non-experience", he asks us to "regard phenomenology as a mode of thinking that
> participates in theology." (p. 176)

Accordingly, Hart (2014) proposes the idea of Basilaic reduction, which is not a

movement inwards, as one finds from Augustine to Husserl, but rather a passage from "world" to

"kingdom." A conversion, Hart states, involves a conversion away from our enthrallment with

the world towards God. This occurs in two phases: *kenosis,* or self-emptying, and *epektasis,* or

stretching out into love of God and neighbor. The philosophical questions "what?" and "why?"

give way to the phenomenological question "how?" (p. 104). In simple terms, phenomenology is

an approach to research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from

the perspective of those who have experienced it (Teherani et al., 2015). The goal of

phenomenology then is to describe lived experiences.

Approaches to Phenomenology

Different kinds of phenomenology are rooted in different ways of conceiving

the *what* and *how* of human experience. Each approach to phenomenology arises from a different

school of philosophy. Transcendental (descriptive) and hermeneutic (interpretative)

phenomenology are the two primary schools of thought.

Transcendental Phenomenology. Husserl (1931) contended that a phenomenon of lived

experience has features commonly perceived by individuals who have experienced the

phenomenon. These commonly perceived features or identified universal essences could develop

into generalizable descriptions representing the phenomenon's true nature. However, the

researcher's challenge is to suspend their attitudes, beliefs, and suppositions to focus on the

participant's experience of the phenomenon and identify its essence (Staiti, 2012).

Transcendental phenomenology was largely developed by Husserl as a philosophical approach to

qualitative research methodology seeking to understand human experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Pure transcendental phenomenology is grounded in the of concept and conditioned upon setting

aside all preconceived ideas (*epoché*) to see phenomena through unclouded glasses, thereby

allowing the true meaning of phenomena to naturally emerge with and within their own identity

(Moustakas, 1994).

Hermeneutic Phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology, also known as interpretive

phenomenology, originates from the work of Martin Heidegger, who began his career in

theology. Heidegger (1967) challenged several critical aspects of Husserl's transcendental

phenomenology, but his foundational break focused on phenomenological inquiry. While

Husserl was interested in knowledge as an epistemological focus, Heidegger was concerned with temporality or an ontological focus (Reiners, 2012). He coined the term "lifeworld," referring to the idea that the world invariably influences individuals' realities they live in, including their personal histories and culture. Rooting hermeneutic phenomenology in interpretation goes beyond descriptive understanding to interpreting experiences and phenomena via the individual's lifeworld (Neubauer et al., 2019). What distinguishes hermeneutic phenomenology is the role of the researcher in the inquiry, which recognizes that the researcher, like the research subject, cannot be rid of their life experiences. Researchers working from this tradition should openly acknowledge their preconceptions and reflect on how their subjectivity is part of the analysis process (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Study's Alignment with Hermeneutic Phenomenology

The study explored how active engagement with other Christians in a Black Greek Letter Organization sorority impacts the spiritual growth of its Christian members. The objectives of this study align with hermeneutic phenomenology in that the research was conducted through an empirical collection of experiences and reflective in an analysis of their meanings. Typically, in studies based in hermeneutic phenomenology, interviews are conducted with individuals who have firsthand knowledge of events, situations, or experiences. The interview(s) attempt to answer two questions (Moustakas, 1994): (a) What have they experienced regarding the phenomenon? and (b) How contexts or situations have typically influenced the experiences of the phenomenon? (Creswell, 2013). The phenomenological design is appropriate for ascertaining richer responses.

Creswell (1994), Holloway (1997), and Mason (1996) proposed that researcher's epistemology are the theory of knowledge that decides how social phenomena should be studied.

This researcher's epistemological position regarding formulating the study was as follows: (a) The researcher's firsthand knowledge of the BGLO sorority membership decorum is advantageous in establishing trust. (b) The researcher's role as a trusted vital instrument for collecting members' lived experiences on a personal, spiritual formation topic relies on being identified as part of the subject's community.

Characteristics of Qualitative Research

Introductory research texts highlight what has historically constituted the essential characteristics of qualitative inquiry: a natural setting, researcher as a key instrument, multiple sources of data, inductive and deductive data analysis, participant meanings, emergent design, reflexivity, and holistic account. Phenomenology attempts to extract the purest, most untainted data; some interpretations adopt bracketing by the researcher to document personal experiences with the subject to help remove herself from the process. One method of bracketing is memos (Maxwell, 2013 as cited in Creswell, 2013). Interviews were conducted one-on-one, with an interview protocol to elicit narrative responses from participants, with the researcher taking memo notes on observations or poignant remarks and audio recording the interviews, which were later transcribed (Creswell, 2013). Then, by identifying significant statements, one can formulate brackets with clustering themes, a detailed description across all themes condensing descriptions to the essential phenomenon to be reassessed by the participants for verification (Morrow et al., 2015). The data analysis then uses the Colaizzi method to provide a rigorous analysis while relying strictly on the data (Morrow et al., 2015).

Research Design Precedents

A similar study investigated Black women attending Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) (Tillis, 2017) and reported the following:

In particular, this investigation provides more insight into the phenomena that contributes to these women's ability and/or non-ability to secure degrees. By learning their effective survival and success strategies, hearing how they cope, and documenting the skills they have acquired to help them move in the direction of attaining their goal of a college degree, this information has implications for practice in places where attrition is an issue for Black women and in policy making. To understand the phenomena, a qualitative research design was used and more specifically, a phenomenological approach. This approach allowed for exploring and analyzing these women's lived experiences at the institution (Creswell, 1998) (p. 15)

Phenomenology aims to describe phenomena as experienced from the perspectives of those who live them without explanations for why the phenomena occur (Spiegelberg, 1975). The central goal is maintaining rigor in qualitative inquiry to correctly represent participants' experiences as reported (Speziale et al., 2011).This study will use the Colaizzi method because it provides a step-by-step framework, as illustrated in the table below, to derive thick and rich descriptions of the phenomenon and to capture the fundamental structure of the participants' experiences.

Table 2

Steps in Colaizzi's Descriptive Phenomenological Method

Step	Description
1. Familiarization	The researcher familiarizes themselves with the data by reading through all the participant accounts several times.
2. Identifying significant statements	The researcher identifies all statements in the accounts that are of direct relevance to the phenomenon under investigation.
3. Formulating meanings	The researcher identifies meanings relevant to the phenomenon that arise from a careful consideration of the significant statements. The researcher must reflexively "bracket"

	their presuppositions to stick closely to the phenomenon as experienced (although Colaizzi recognizes that complete bracketing is never possible).
4. Clustering themes	The researcher clusters the identified meanings into themes that are common across all accounts. Again, bracketing of presuppositions is crucial, especially to avoid any potential influence of the existing theory.
5. Developing an exhaustive description	The researcher writes a full and inclusive description of the phenomenon, incorporating all the themes produced at Step 4.
6. Producing the fundamental structure	The researcher condenses the exhaustive description to a short, dense statement that captures only those aspects deemed to be essential to the structure of the phenomenon.
7. Seeking verification of the fundamental structure	The researcher returns the fundamental structure statement to all participants (or sometimes a subsample in larger studies) to ask whether it captures their experience. They may go back and modify earlier steps in the analysis considering this feedback.

*From "Learning from the "Lifeworld." Published in *The Psychologist*, (Brooks, 2015).

Setting

The Pan-Hellenic Council, the organizing body for the Divine Nine, divides its hundreds of chapters of fraternities and sororities (nearly two million members) into regions (National Pan-Hellenic Council, 2020). For example, one of the subject sororities uses the following regions: North Atlantic, South Atlantic, Great Lakes, South-Eastern, South Central, Central, Far

Western, and International (Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., 2021). This study sampled the Christian members in the Southern regions of the United States.

According to the Pew Research Center (2020b), the top 10 most religious states in America are Southern states, except Oklahoma; the southern region is traditionally called the Bible Belt. The setting heightens the likelihood of increased interaction with the identified experiential phenomenon (Smith, 2013). Study participants were from three of the four sororities: (a) Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated, (b) Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated (was not represented), (c) Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Incorporated, and (d) Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Incorporated. The participants were reached through BGLO social media networks, local HBCUs, regional offices, graduate chapters, local congregations, and referrals for other participants and associates of the researcher. These methods and settings were selected based on a greater likelihood of locating potential qualifying participants willing to participate in this research study. The local graduate chapters in Georgia usually meet monthly, and the subcommittees meet bimonthly or more frequently. While there is variation between sororities, meetings are usually held at local schools or churches on Saturdays from 9 am to 12 pm or 1 pm. The researcher sent study solicitation letters to each of the four local chapters as well, requesting they share the information with their members. The Pan-Hellenic Council meets quarterly in Decatur, Georgia, the national headquarters, and a letter was emailed to their communications secretary.

All BGLO fraternities and sororities gain membership by undergoing a membership intake process (MIP), formerly known as pledging. Their MIP process is intentionally shrouded in secrecy to promote exclusivity, and their power and influence to create a self-perpetuating Black oligarchy (Chambers, 2019). The process of MIP involves hours of study of their

organizations' history and lessons in ethical standards. The ceremonies, rituals, oaths, or

identifiers of each organization are only known to that organization's membership and remain

secret. Some traditions of MIP fortify the bonds of sisterhood through community service

projects and aspect of corporate living.[8] Traditionally those joining BGLOs are encouraged to

participate in prayer, work unison, and volunteering. After successfully navigating the MIP

period, prospective members' status begins a transitional phase forging bonds among line sisters

through reliance on one another for support. According to Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority,

Incorporated. (1977), their rituals in the booklet represent the sorority's spiritual foundation and

are revered in the highest esteem.

Participants

The researcher used purposeful sampling to recruit participants who provided in-depth

and detailed information about the phenomenon under investigation. Purposeful sampling is a

technique widely used in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases for the

most effective use of limited resources according to Patton (as cited in Palinkas et al., 2013).

This technique involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups who are knowledgeable

about or experienced in a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Qualitative research

aims to select participants who best help the researcher understand the problem and the research

question. The research participant sample included graduate sorority members over eighteen of

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[8] The researcher is referencing a member of a BGLO sorority having prospective members participate in

community service projects as a collective during their MIP process; examples include making dresses out of

pillowcases for children in Haiti. These projects may involve long hours, and the work may be accomplished during

optional group activities such as sleepovers.

the Divine Nine from the Southern region of the United States. This participant selection does not suggest random sampling or the selection of many participants, which is typical in quantitative research (Creswell, 2014).

The researcher generated qualifying, although highly subjective, criteria that each participant met for the study. Criteria for participants included questions related to active engagement in their respective sororities' committees within their local chapters and part of a graduate chapter. The researcher defines active engagement as maintaining sorority membership within a local graduate chapter with a consistent attendance record and participation in monthly meetings, sorority-sponsored community outreach events, and at least two service committees within the organization. Participants were required to have at least two years of graduate chapter membership and to be professing born-again Christians. There were no limitations on the denomination. The sampling frame consisted of volunteers solicited via BGLO social media platforms on Facebook such as: Divine Nine Nation, AKA Soror Chat, AKAs United in Christian Love, We Help Each Other AKA Networking, Black Greek Fraternities and Sororities, and The Black Greek Network. Additional solicitation was directed to all four BGLO sorority regional pages contacting the regional directors within the Southern region. A request was made for participants from the Pan-Hellenic Council and HBCUs in the consortium of schools in the Atlanta University Center in Atlanta, Georgia. There are AME churches in the researcher's area with pastors that are members of BGLO organizations who were contacted, and the researcher also used personal contacts and referrals to solicit participants. The participant list consisted of a regional director and three participants that responded to the Facebook solicitations, but the majority were referrals. A single-stage design was used to select participants. Sample size guidelines suggest that between 6 and 20 interviews would be adequate (Creswell, 2007).

Interviewers and note-takers agree that thematic saturation, the point at which no new concepts emerge from subsequent interviews, can be achieved following the completion of 20 interviews (Patton, 2002). The participants ranged in age from 25 to 70 years old and were predominantly professionals with graduate degrees.

Role of the Researcher

Black Greek Letter Organization sororities traditionally have been shrouded in mystery and secrecy, which may be a part of their exclusivity and one of the reasons for the gap in the research literature. Access to the inner dynamics of these organizations by outsiders/researchers is limited. This researcher fully discloses active membership of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated for 33 years. However, in the two years before conducting this research study, the researcher shifted to general membership to avoid association with any local chapter.

Familiarity with and understanding of BGLO culture, as well as knowledge of the inner works of one of the BGLO sororities, was advantageous in building trust with research subjects. The role of the researcher in a qualitative research study is to attempt to access the thoughts and feelings of the study participants (Sutton & Zubin, 2015). Using a purposeful sample minimized ethical conflicts, such as backyard research a term used to describe research conducted in an environment in which the researcher already holds another role (Creswell, 2013). There was an intentional effort to select participants without a personal connection to the researcher.

The researcher's primary responsibility was safeguarding participants and their data (Sutton & Zubin, 2015). Following procedures to mitigate the potentially deleterious effects of preconceptions that may taint the research process, the data was analyzed using seven specific steps that provide a rigorous analysis while relying strictly on the data (Morrow et al., 2015).

Then, through identifying significant statements, formulating brackets, and clustering themes, a detailed description across all themes were condensed descriptions to the essential phenomenon for verification (Colaizzi, 1978). Colaizzi's method was incorporated into this hermeneutic phenomenological study as a mitigation tool against bias concluding with one of the most effective means of limiting bias—to return the research results to the participants for their interpretations of the researcher's findings. Further, some cultural nuances and experiences shared as Black women tied this researcher to the study, potentially shaping interpretations while describing the phenomena of spiritual formation occurring among Christian BGLO members. These mitigations and concerns were the researcher's responsibility as the key instrument in a qualitative study, collecting data, examining documents, observing behavior, interviewing participants, and especially considering the sensitivity and importance of privacy in discussing spiritual matters.

Ethical Considerations

This section addresses an overview of the ethical challenges in a qualitative research study, spanning from designing the study to reporting the findings from the data. Following the guidelines of the Christian Leadership in Education program in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity, after completing the Research Prospectus video conference hearing, the researcher applied for review and approval by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is a federally mandated body that ensures the ethical treatment of research subjects. This study included no persons at risk or participants younger than 18 years old.

Every effort ensured participant anonymity using pseudonyms. Interviews were conducted virtually and confidentially, one-on-one, in private settings. The participants' responses, paper documents such as consent forms, field notes, transcriptions, recordings, and

zip drives containing personal information were temporarily stored in a locked file cabinet and electronically on a laptop. Three years after the study, the paper files will be shredded in accordance with IRB policy. Electronic files will be deleted. The researcher has exclusive access to the data and uses a specified laptop for data collection.

Additionally, the computer used was configured to "lockout" after 20 minutes of inactivity and required a password for access; this reduces the risk of theft or unauthorized use of data. Virtual interviews were conducted through video conferencing on the Microsoft Teams platform. Transcripts were derived from an audio recording of the interview, not via the platform. The audio recording device was plugged in with an amplifier next to the laptop in a private space with a controlled noise level. The researcher opened a blank Google document and then opened the Voice Typing tool in Microsoft Word to assist with transcription. The researcher carefully ensured that the Voice Typing appeared and then ran a test of the audio, ensuring the microphone was on and language preference set to English. Additionally, an audio recorder was used as a backup to ensure the transcription was accurate and thorough.

The researcher thoroughly explained the purpose of the research to each participant, including their role, the researcher's role, how interviews would proceed, the purpose, process, and how the findings would be presented in the dissertation. The researcher reminded participants that they may withdraw or decline participation in the research at any time. After a full explanation, the participants completed an informed consent form (Appendix A), acknowledging their understanding and agreement to participate. Since the phenomenon studied involved discussing participants' personal beliefs and spiritual faith, utmost sensitivity was employed. The researcher assured participants that their responses would remain confidential

under a pseudonym and that no information concerning specific chapter affiliation would be

revealed.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

This section addresses the desired information in response to the research questions, how

interviews optimize attaining that information, and the method of data collection based on

procedures, instrumentation, and requirements for IRB approval.

Collection Methods

Phenomenology uses an in-depth description of the typical characteristics of the spiritual

formation phenomena that have occurred. The primary data collection method was in-depth, one-

on-one, virtual interviews between the researcher and the selected sorority members. Participants

were pre-screened to meet the study requirements and a folder created with brief profiles

describing the participants, age, membership details and length of the membership, and their

residences. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

Instruments and Protocols

The researcher conducted semi-structured in-depth phenomenological interviews with

sorority members from the three BGLO sororities. This section discusses the instruments and

protocols used for data collection; it also provides information about how the tools were

developed.

Instruments

As interviewer, the researcher served as the primary research instrument. The study

employed an interview protocol (Appendix D) to guide the discussion. These interviews

comprised open-ended questions about the participant's experiences, feelings, beliefs, and

convictions about their spiritual formation (Welman & Kruger, 1999).

The researcher also used a reflexive diary to jot down brief observations and notes during the interview. Each virtual interview was conducted via Microsoft Teams and was audio recorded using a digital voice recorder.

Interviews

The study participants experienced spiritual formation and maturation and shared their reflections. The interview questions were derived from the four main research questions to address the two objectives of this phenomenological study. First, how have they experienced Christian spiritual growth through their active engagement in a BGLO sorority, and secondly how has it influenced their lived experiences of spiritual growth? These two objectives formulated the research questions and the subsidiary questions, focusing on the context and topic, which negates any need for additional validation.

Data obtained perspectives were then bracketed, creating clusters and themes through the Colaizzi method (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). According to Miller and Crabtree (1992), the second form of bracketing requires the researcher to bracket their preconceptions, enter the individual's lifeworld, and use themselves as an experiencing interpreter. Moustakas (1994) pointed out that "Husserl called the freedom from suppositions the *epoché*, a Greek word meaning to stay away from or abstain. Husserl called this bracketing when performing an inquiry from the perspective of the researcher" (p.85). As per Bailey (2017), the informal interview used semi-structured questions to ask predefined questions, allowing for more in-depth inquiry that was unplanned instead of a structured interview with pre-planned questions. This more informal approach was a conscious attempt by the researcher to uncover more information about the participants' experiences in their own words. The interview was reciprocal: the researcher and the research subject engaged in the dialogue, encouraging a more conversational flow with participants. An

Interview protocol guided interviews (Appendix D) that correlated interview questions to the

research questions based on the literature review. The interviews also examined the spiritual

practices that are the vehicles of spiritual formation, the cultural and intersectional aspects

specific to Black women, and the phases of spiritual formation a highlighted by Teo (2017).

Interviews began with some background questions about the interviewee. Specific questions

based on RQ1 through RQ4 initiated follow-up subsidiary questions with the interviewee when it

was necessary, relying on notetaking in the reflexive diary with a feedback section to follow up

or redirect the discussion. The interviews were 45 minutes long, with a flexible timeline for

follow-up.

Reflexivity Protocol

Researchers suggest that using a reflexive diary helps develop bracketing skills and

facilitates decision-making during the phenomenological investigation (Creswell, 2014). The

researcher used a reflexive diary to write down thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. Such a

practice allows researchers to reexamine when issues arise that might affect the research process.

The reflexive diary was organized into three sections: before, during, and after the interview. The

previous section discussed the concept of the *epoché,* which this researcher reflexively

incorporated throughout the research process. Another aspect of reflecting on the role of the

researcher was to increase awareness of the potential for bias by the researcher, the participants,

or the research sites that may unduly influence the researcher's interpretations. "Backyard"

research (Glesne & Peshkin as cited in Creswell, 2014) involves studying the researcher's

organization (Creswell, 2014). The interview questions focused on the research objective and the

subsequent questions for clarification or elaboration, as the researcher reflected on her diary

entries before concluding the interview (Sutton & Zubin, 2015).

Procedures

This section will guide the reader through the procedures the researcher followed throughout the study, including IRB approval, participant solicitation, scheduling interviews, conducting the interviews, transcription, narrative member checking, and analysis through the Colaizzi method.

The researcher's research plans were reviewed and approved by the IRB of Liberty University. The researcher also created the interview protocol. An application to the IRB included procedures and information about participants so that the committee could review the extent to which participants might be at risk. In addition, the researcher had participants sign informed consent forms agreeing to the provisions of the study before participating (Creswell, 2014). Participants submitted informed consent forms (see Appendix A) that specified prequalification criteria and studied procedural details.

Participants' solicitation followed an organized system annotated in a contact log (Appendix H) to keep track of how participants were contacted, dates, and email. The researcher used open call posts on several Divine Nine Facebook pages (Appendix C); researchers should note that these pages are restricted and required prior approval from website administrators approvals were received via Facebook notifications. A secondary form of soliciting participants was contacting local chapters via email directly (see Appendix B) and contacting their respective presidents for permission to solicit participants through their graduate chapter membership (Neuman, 2000). An additional method was to contact regional directors from the four sororities in the South also reaching out to local congregations and HBCUs. The final form of solicitation was via associations, networking recommendations, or snowballing (Bailey, 2017).

The research interviews were scheduled based on the participants' availability using Microsoft Teams calendar and scheduling with an ability to send a meeting invitation. The schedule was limited to one interview a day with one day between each interview. This allowed the researcher to prepare for each interview and allow time for transcription of the interview following the recording, and to expedite returning the transcripts to the participants for their review.

The researcher used Microsoft Teams to conduct virtual interviews through the researcher's Liberty University email, which enabled her to schedule meetings by sending a link the participants could open by clicking on the link. A digital audio recorder was used to record the interview. The researcher also maintained a reflexive diary to journal during the interviews throughout the research study process (Sutton & Zubin, 2015). The reflexive diary was used to jot down observations during the interview such as participant reactions, interesting statements the researcher wanted to follow up on in the discussion, and to keep track of remarks made by the interviewee as lead-ins during the conversation. The interviews were conducted in a quiet location for the participants and from the researcher's home office to diminish background noises blurring the recording.

The interviews were transcribed using Microsoft word's dictation voice typing (Creswell, 2014) and then the researcher replayed the recording while making corrections to the language, grammar, punctation, wording, and then indicating who was speaking. This formatted the transcript to be easily read by the participants during their review.

Participants were given oral directions concerning review of the transcription at the end of their interview and again when the transcript was emailed to them. Any discrepancies in the content, intention or grammar could be identified and then corrected by the researcher. They

usually responded within a week or two and all analysis of the data was suspended until the participants approved the transcription.

All forms, transcripts, notes, recordings, and diaries are kept in a locked file cabinet or secured on the researcher's laptop (University of Sussex, 2017). Once the data was collected and verified, the focus shifted to analysis, which required an organized approach in qualitative research since the volume of information was significant and categorized to refine for clarity. The Colaizzi method was employed as a framework. Preliminarily, the research extracted significant statements based on the research questions to formulate meaning. Then the researcher created categories-based on patterns observed by printing the transcripts and highlighting using a color-coded system to identify emergent themes. The themes revealed clusters. The clusters formed a description of the phenomenon.

Data Analysis

This section discusses the organization of the data for analysis using the Colaizzi method. Transcriptions allowed the researcher to read and reread the interviews to formulate meaning, then refine into categories and cluster themes used for coding. The coding provided a clear set of specific descriptors for the studied phenomenon. The researcher also printed hard copies of the interviews to draw out poignant quotes that address the phenomena of spiritual formation process. This process created a fundamental structure for an interpretive description of the spiritual formation for the summary.

Analysis Methods

Phenomenological qualitative research generates a large volume of data, so it is essential to have a defined plan for data analysis before data are collected. This section discusses the

data's transcription, organization, development, application of codes, theme identification, validity, and summarization.

Data Transcription

As previously stated in the section on transcription, the following methods were used to transcribe the interviews into written form. The recording device was plugged into the researcher's home office laptop with a controlled noise level to capture the interview content. After the interview, the researcher opened a blank Word document and then used the Voice Typing tool in Microsoft Word, played back the interview recording, and monitored as the software transcribed the interview content. The researcher then replayed the interview and made necessary grammar, punction corrections, and corrected misinterpreted content in the transcript. Before this procedure, the researcher carefully ensured that the Voice Typing appeared functioning by running an audio test, ensuring the microphone was in the correct language preference, English. The transcript was additionally run through Grammarly to remove unnecessary filler words and to use the researcher's reflexive diary to help clarify the narrative with physical gestures, emotional reactions, and other notes. This method helped to ensure a thorough transcription protocol.

Data Organization

The researcher organized and transcribed interview data using Colaizzi's method of data analysis in phenomenological research. Data were organized into individual profile folders for each participant containing her demographic information, signed and dated consent forms, and transcribed interviews. The researcher printed each interview and, using a color-coding system with highlights, significant statements were extracted. Following Colaizzi's (1978) steps as a structured analysis matrix, the researcher extracted significant statements from the transcripts

and then used deductive content analysis for formulating meanings. The theoretical knowledge acquired through the literature review and embedded in the construct of the research questions as the starting point formed the meaning from the participants' lived experiences. The researcher charted the statements under pseudonyms for transcript identifiers, page number, and line number. The result produced emerging themes. Excerpts were selected coherently to form a detailed description of the phenomenon, revealing the fundamental structure of the phenomenon for validation of the hypothesis. See Figure 2 below for an illustration of the process.

Figure 2
The Steps of Colaizzi's Phenomenological Data Analysis Organization

Each of the transcripts was read and re-read to obtain a general sense of the whole content

Significant statements related to the phenomenon under study extracted from transcripts

Formulated meanings derived from significant statements

Formulated meanings organized into clusters of themes and themes

Findings integrated into an exhaustive description

The fundamental structure of the phenomenon described

The findings from the study participants validated

Development and Application of Codes

Significant phrases were charted. The process focused on meanings, which involved asking participants to describe the role that being part of and participating in a sorority has on their spiritual formation and experiences of spiritual growth and maturation.

Table 3
Example of Significant Statement Chart Sections

Significant Statements	Formulated Meaning
Statement made by particpant in interview in response to RQ.	Response RQ. implies a pattern, can be categorized into a theme.

Figure 3 illustrates the formulation of the significant statements for meaning. The formulated meanings became cluster themes, and the researcher refined them into emergent themes—an example depicted in Figure 3. The emergent themes aligned with the spiritually formative building blocks in the research questions.

Figure 3
Developing Theme Clusters and Emergent Themes from Formulated Meaning

| Sorors | Big Sisters | Fictive Kinship | CLUSTER | Emergent Theme SISTERHOOD |
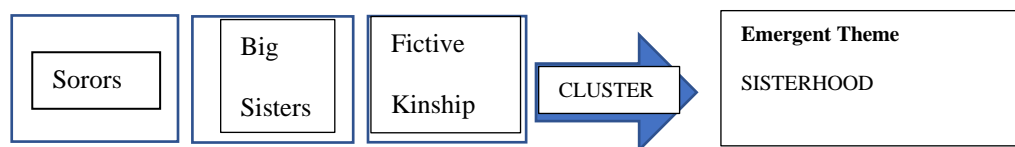
In the fifth stage of analysis, the researcher integrated verbatim excerpts to form a detailed description of the phenomenon directly from the words of the participants—a reduction of the findings into a clear and concise structure. The final step in the Colaizzi method involved validating the findings of qualitative research to ensure trustworthiness and credibility in the research design, such as member checking and reflexivity (Leedy et al., 2016).

Trustworthiness

The researcher fostered trustworthiness using the reflexivity protocol, the member checking protocol in transcription, acknowledgment of personal biases, and developing a thick description in the content analysis as an overall research design (Leedy et al., 2016). The reflexive diary served as a place to write down observations and informal notes. Lincoln and

Guba (1985) described member checks as "the most crucial technique for establishing validation" in a study (p. 314) . The study employed narrative accuracy checks (member checking); the researcher returned the interview transcripts to the participants for approval following the interview. It consisted of taking data and notes back to the study participants to confirm the narrative's accuracy, finally accumulating thick and rich descriptions from the interviews. The participants' verbatim accounts established credibility in the study by utilizing their first-hand accounts of their lived experiences in rich detail. According to Denzin et al. (2005), "thick descriptions are deep, dense, detailed accounts; by contrast thin descriptions lack detail and simply report facts" (p. 83). The purpose of a thick description was to create verisimilitude statements that produce for the readers the feeling that they have experienced or could experience the events described in a study, thus establishing credibility through the lens of readers (Creswell, 2007).

Qualitative trustworthiness

Historically, qualitative research is viewed as "soft" science and criticized for lacking scientific rigor as compared to quantitative research, using experimental, objective methods. Common criticisms are that qualitative research is subjective, anecdotal, subject to researcher bias, and lacks generalizability by producing large quantities of detailed information about a single unique phenomenon or setting (Koch, 2006). However, the qualitative method is not inferior but a different approach to studying humans through their lived experiences (Cope, 2013). Qualitative research can explain the richness of human processes in ways quantitative research often may not. Qualitative research calls for a broad, horizontal view into the process that demonstrates the complexity and nuance of socially engrained systems and processes.

Credibility

The researcher enhanced the credibility of the research by describing participants'

experiences and then verifying the research findings with the participants. Member checking is

critical to consider a qualitative study credible when the descriptions of human experience are

immediately recognizable by individuals who share the same experience (Sandelowski, 1986).

Similarly, using a reflexive diary added to research credibility by allowing the researcher to

journal before, after, and during interviews. These two elements support credibility when

reporting requires the researcher to demonstrate engagement, methods of observation, as an audit

trails (Cope, 2013). Engagement has become a buzzword among qualitative researchers,

reflecting broader transformations in the academy that increasingly require researchers to

demonstrate social accountability and the relevance of the knowledge they produce (Gibbons,

1994). Two examples of social accountability and relevance are first expanding the conversation

about spiritual formation outside the traditionally recognized Christian institutions, beyond the

church walls and secondly challenging Eurocentric paradigms. Then by considering triangulation

as a qualitative research strategy to test validity through the convergence of these two different

perspectives, increasing the study's credibility. There are four types of triangulation: (a) method

triangulation, (b) investigator triangulation, (c) theory triangulation, and (d) data source

triangulation. This study employed theory triangulation using Teo's phases of spiritual formation

grounded in mimetic Christology, BFT, and data source triangulation through interviews and a

reflexive diary (UNAIDS, 2010, para.4).

Dependability

Although Cope (2013) referred to a method of observation, in his work on credibility and

trustworthiness of qualitative research, the equivalence is that interview structures would be

semi-structured questionsfor this researcher's study. Respondents answered preset open-ended questions. Semi-structured interviews allow for in-depth interviews with an individual based on an interview protocol, a schematic presentation of questions, or topics controlled by the interviewer. The core research questions guided the questions in the interview. The core questions evolved during the interview process in dialogue as the research sought to have participants expand their responses. A study is deemed dependable through the researcher's process and descriptions if the findings are replicable with similar participants in similar conditions (Koch, 2006).

Confirmability

Qualitative researchers use the audit trail to establish the study's rigor by providing the details of the data analysis and some of the decisions that led to the findings. Audit trails or confirmability audits attest to the researcher's interpretations (Polit & Beck, 2012). Audit trails are an in-depth approach to illustrating the findings based on the participants' narratives; they describe how the researcher collected and transparently analyzed the data. Parts of an audit trail may include examples of the coding process, descriptions of how individual codes became themes, and a rationale for what codes clustered together to form the basis of a theme. These activities clarify why decisions were made and show that the analysis follows a logical path (Statistic Solution, 2020). This research study incorporated an audit trail that included examples of the coding process (presented in a table), descriptions of how the researcher worked from unique codes to themes, and a rationale for what codes cluster together to form the basis of a theme.

Transferability

As profoundly and concisely captured by Lincoln and Guba (1985), "It is, in summary, not the naturalist's task to provide an index of transferability, it is his or her responsibility to provide the database that makes transferability judgments possible on the part of potential appliers" (p. 316). Thus, the transferability criterion depends on the aim of the qualitative study and may only be relevant if the research intends to generalize about the subject or phenomenon (Sandelowski, 1986). Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend providing a thick and rich description of the phenomenon. Specifically, thick description is a technique in which a qualitative researcher provides a complete and detailed account of their experiences during data collection. A qualitative researcher makes explicit connections to the data collection's cultural and social contexts. This method refers to discussing where the interviews occurred and other aspects of data collection that help provide a more prosperous and fuller understanding of the research setting. This information helps the reader construct the scene of the research study from the participants' perspective, perhaps revealing implicit biases that may affect their responses. It is helpful to place what participants express to the researcher in the context of the surrounding social and cultural environment of the research study. This process allows outside researchers and readers to make the transferability judgments themselves. This research is potentially applicable to studies of the lived experiences of Black women, especially as a framework for exploring spiritual patterns within Black communities or for analyzing how organizations and institutions can be vehicles for spiritual formation outside the church. However, it cannot be applied to all Afro-diasporic descendants, as Black communities vary greatly based on language, nationality, and geographic location. An example of this limitation could be the Garifuna in Guatemala or Honduras. Black communities on the coast maintain a blended Arawakan language

with distinct African roots among the Mayan majority population. Such are tightknit fictive kinship communities whose women form a syncretized Christian tradition. They exhibit similarities to the corporate spiritual formation of the BGLO population in this study, but there are apparent distinctions.

Chapter Summary

The chapter outlined the research method used to answer the research questions, including the researcher's qualitative phenomenological research design, setting, participants, role, ethics, data collection, and analysis. Chapter Three provided a summary of the researcher's overall methodological approach. Hermeneutic phenomenological research allowed the researcher to investigate the meaning of experiences from the participant's perspective. These protocols move the focus of phenomenological inquiry from description to the interpretation of the lived experiences of spiritual formation for Black women in BGLOs' sororities through spiritual growth and development toward spiritual maturation. The intentionality and exhaustive nature of the phenomenology approach to interviewing and the Colaizzi method of analysis were well-suited to address the research questions and broaden the dialogue on spiritual formation. Chapter Four will provide the study results and demonstrate the methodology described in Chapter Three.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Overview

The first three chapters of this dissertation explored the problem, background, literature review, research methodology, and gap in the literature pertaining to this phenomenological study of Christian spiritual growth among active Christian members of Black Greek Letter Sororities. Chapter Four presents an analysis of this researcher's findings from the data collected via interviews, reflexive notations, and memorber checking, which were divided into the three themes that form the fundamental structure of the phenomenon. The compilation protocol, measures, data collection, and strategies are explained; demographic and sample data are provided; and data analysis and findings are presented. Then, the chapter concludes with an interpretation of the findings and the evaluation of the research design.

Compilation Protocol and Measures

This section provides a description of the compilation protocol and attendant measures necessary to fully describe the process by which this researcher conducted the study. Four protocols and measures were used to assemble the data: (a) Reflexivity Protocol, (b) Interview Protocol, (c) Transcription Protocol, and (d) Member Checking Measures, including the Colaizzi Method.

Reflexivity Protocol

The researcher divided the reflexive diary into three sections: before, during, and after the study. The before section focused on self-awareness as a form of audit trail, as researchers should try to be aware of their ontological, social, cultural, and political positions (Weick, 2002, p .894). The researcher began by asking three questions:

- What is the motivation for undertaking this research study?

- What assumptions may the researcher bring to this and how might they influence the approach?

- How is the researcher connected to the research, emotionally, experientially, or theoretically?

These were the focus of the journal entries before conducting the study. The desire to elevate the voices, perspectives, and experiences of Black women was motivated by the belief that their contributions are universally beneficial. Having lived as a Black woman, the researcher recognized the impact of spirituality within the community, standing in contrast to recent denunciation of BGLOs by some Christians. The researcher's connection to the research was disclosed at the outset; and likewise, the advantages of being a member of a BGLO and being familiar with the culture of BGLO sororities have been beneficial in terms of interpreting the responses of the participants.

During the interview process the researcher kept a small notepad that listed the interviewee's name, organization, age, location, and years of membership. While interviewing, the researcher jotted down remarks that the interviewee made of interest or that were unclear, additionally noting unique expressions or powerful quotes to be referenced later. Then observations about the participant's interactions with the interviewer were also noted. The after section of the reflexive diary was less structured and consistent. It documented personal reflections on the research process.

Interview Protocol

The research questions were developed to address elements of spiritual growth and engagement in BGLOs, as elaborated on in the literature review. For example, RQ1 addresses how spiritual growth is evidenced in active engagement with other Christian sorority members.

Associated subsidiary questions help the interviewer convey the question's intent and clarify the interviewee's answers. One of the subsidiary questions for RQ1 asks how often the women participate in spiritual disciplines such as prayer, meditation, and worship services. The interview protocol aided in framing the conversation and kept it focused on the research topic. Once the participant was initially contacted via email a consent form was sent for them to sign and date. Following receipt of the completed consent form, an interview was scheduled via Microsoft Teams. The participants were given informed consent before interviewing and asked to review it. The form included details on the central focus of the study, the interview procedures, requirements, and length, as well as confirming the participants' voluntary participation in the study. Each interview began with a brief introduction to the study's overall purpose, and an explanation of the transcription protocol. After the interviews, the transcriptions were returned to the participant for verification of accuracy. After the participants verification of the transcripts, the data was analyzed and coded for themes. The participants were contacted again to verify the themes reflected in their intended responses and to verify again they were clear about what the research questions were asking.

Transcription Protocol

Analyzing the large volume of data generated from qualitative interviews requires categorizing data to interpret meaning. Categorizing the data established patterns revealing common themes among the transcript by employing a color-coding system. The interpretative process is part of qualitative analysis as noted by Nascimento and Steinbruch (as cited in Davidson 2009). It is necessary to transcribe the interviews (audio-recorded) as a central practice in qualitative research (Davidson, 2009). The transcription has, over time, shown evidence about certain phenomena that constitute research interest in a study (Duranti, 2006). At the same time,

to ensure rigor and validity, the transcription process may present many complexities and can be performed through different routes (Oliver et al., 2005). Intentionally detailing the protocols followed reduces postulating concerning the methodology employed. The researcher used Microsoft Voice Typing by opening a blank page and playing the audio recordings to be initially transcribed. The software is beneficial but inaccurate due to people's accents, cadence, speed of their speech, and colloquialisms. The researcher replayed the interviews while reviewing the transcription of Microsoft Voice, correcting the errors line by line or clarifying statements by removing speech fillers such as "you know", "like", and "so". The researcher reviewed the transcription using Grammarly to assist with phrasing and punctuation. The interviews were read and reread to ensure that the final draft matched the interviewee's content, intent, and meaning. Additionally, during transcription, any mention of the participant's identity was denoted by ellipses "…" and the transcription was verbatim.

Member Checking Procedure

The narrative accuracy technique is one form of member checking used by researchers to help improve the accuracy, credibility, validity, and transferability. This technique allows the researcher to confirm with the participants the accuracy of the transcriptions, making sure that they reflect their words and intent, securing that the data is derived from a credible source (Speziale et al., 2011). After producing a final draft, the researcher sent it to the participants for their review. Participants checked the accuracy of the content and ensured that the intent of the transcript reflected their responses. Within 72 hours of the interview, the researcher emailed the transcript with instructions. The researcher requested participants respond in two weeks with any discrepancies of the ten interviews conducted, averaging eight to ten pages in length. There were two discrepancies. The first was a corrected typo error, and the second was a question

concerning whether the researcher felt the responses adequately answered the questions. The

researcher reviewed the transcript and reassured the participant that the interview went well,

which resolved the matter. An additional form of member checking involved emailing the

research findings to the participants and requesting their feedback concerning accuracy and

alignment with their comments.

Coding Protocol

The seven stages of the Colaizzi method provide a tool for developing a detailed

description of the phenomenon through the words of the study participants, relying strictly on the

data (Morrow et al., 2015). The method consists of those seven steps to develop rigorous

analysis. For this, the interviewee's experiences are meaningful, formulating a description from

the phrases obtained. These phases are as follows in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4
Coding Protocol Using Colaizzi's Phenomenological Descriptive Method
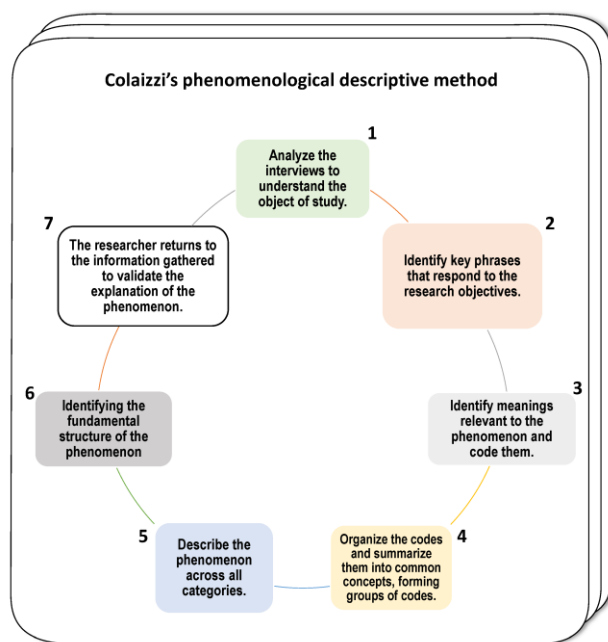
Familiarizing the Data

During the data transcription, the researcher reviewed, edited, read, and reread the material multiple times to become familiar with the content of the interviews. This process allowed the researcher to analyze how the data gathered from the interviews addressed this phenomenological study's objective, that framed how the four research questions of the interview protocol progressed. The interviews were printed and posted on the researcher's office walls. Different color codes were used, corresponding to evidentiary elements of spiritual discipline that lead to growth and the participants' lived experiences as highlighted by the research questions. The researcher identified significant statements on the spiritual growth experienced by the participants. Table 4 is a sample of how the color coded system was applied throughout all the transcripts.

Table 4

Color-coding System Example

A-Prayer/Personal Relationship with God	B- Servanthood/Loving One Another	C- Fellowship/Community/Sisterhood
"At every meeting, there's always meditation or prayer. We incorporate prayer in everything that we do within our organization. It is at the center of anything we do!"	*"But we try to focus on the nature of sisterhood; that's why forgiveness is essential to move past disagreement."*	*"We're here on Earth to help those who cannot help themselves. You never know when your hard time might come, so I believe in planting good seeds."*

Significant Statements

Significant statements are vital phrases that respond to the research questions (Colaizzi, 1978). The primary objective in this study was to describe how active engagement in a Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO) sorority impacts the Christian spiritual growth of Christian

members. These significant statements capture the in particpant's words their experience of

spiritual growth. The lines of the transcription were number for organizational purposes as the

research systematical analyzed the data and tracked hundreds of statements. Figure 5 provides an

example of an extracted significant statement from a participant's interview transcript. The

highlighted portion of the participant's interview transcript represents a statement deemed

significant to the study.

Figure 5
Example Extraction of a Significant Statement

> **80 Interviewer-** We are moving into our next section, which is based on how active engagement in the
> 81 sorority positively influences spiritual growth? So, have those corporate practices that we mentioned
> 82 earlier with the other members impacted your personal relationship with God?
> **83 AJ**- It has caused my prayer life to grow. Again, I'm one of those people the chapters is coming
> 84 to for advice or prayer to talk, for council, for those types of things. And so, because now I have all
> 85 these people who rely on my relationship with God for counseling and guidance. It has increased my
> 86 prayer life; it has grown my studying of the word. Because I'm a person that I never want to cause
> 87 somebody to miss God or give somebody something that's out of my flesh. Whatever I release, I want it
> 88 to come straight from God. Now I believe you can't do that unless you spend time with him. Unless you're
> 89 seeking his face. Unless you're reading the word. So, for me. Because I try to be intentional about what I
> 90 offer people from a spiritual place. It has made me, forced me to level up in prayer and study.

Figure 5 is an *Example Extraction of a Significant Statement* (Participant AJ, Transcript I, Lines 80-90.

Spiritual growth involves applying disciplines that constitute evidentiary elements of an

intangible internal process. Spiritual disciplines must be engaged in freely and out of a desire for

God, not outward appearance (Calhoun, 2015). These include spiritual practices such as

corporate prayer, worship inclusive of devotion, meditation, attending church services, fasting,

spiritual accountability, and fellowship have become embedded in BGLOs due to historical and social factors. According to Chandler (2017):

> Bonhoeffer's experience with the Abyssinian and African American spiritual practices has binocular resonance as history and culture developed over time. He described the role of four spiritual foci that have contributed to African American spirituality in dynamic tandem: (1) worship, (2) scripture, (3) the community of faith and prayer, and (4) community outreach (p. 171).

The researcher then created charts extracting statements from the transcripts and generated four charts with a large volume of data. The second half of addressing this research's objective focused on pulling out lived experiences shared by the participants and setting them aside; they were used later in the Colaizzi method when describing the phenomenon across all categories.

Formulating Meaning

The researcher formulated meanings by focusing on the attributes of Christlikeness explored through the research questions. This formulation process continued with a concept-driven approach that reviewed the initial responses to construct a coding scheme. The meanings were derived from all significant statements identified. Primary meanings were coded and grouped into categories, reflecting an exhaustive description. Coding is identifying specific details and notations that may be relevant in answering identified research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Table 5 provides examples of how significant statements were converted into formulated meanings. The subsequent step involved thoroughly reviewing the data for patterns developed into cluster themes.

Table 5

Examples of Formulated Meanings from Significant Statements

Significant Statements	Formulated meaning
"I know Sorors that do not go to church. I have one Soror that I'm close to; she is LGBTQIA, and she is still trying to figure it out. Where God is or where she is with her other choices. And so, you know, I talk to her a lot." (MR, Transcript I, Lines 170-172).	Demonstrating the love of Christ through extending encouragement and sharing faith.
"Once I establish a relationship with a lady or a guy, I say, hey, I go to this church…. Then my next question after all that is, where do you go to church?" (GT, Transcript G, Lines 185-187).	Seeking ways to share faith and lead into inviting others to church
"That, if we call on him and come into agreement…. hold on, I'm getting excited; let me calm down (laugh)." "When we agree with each other, how God can move. That blesses my heart because there are many different options to cope. So, when they are learning I can choose Jesus. And they understand I can pray about this thing, and God will answer." (AJ, Transcript A, Lines 154-158).	Shares her faith by encouraging other Sorors to step out on faith and engaging them in the prayer of agreement

Cluster Themes

Formulated meanings were extensively reviewed, grouped by relevance into cluster themes, and coded with a descriptive thematic label. Cluster themes were examined further and grouped into emergent themes that best described the overall meaning of the participants' lived experiences. Table 6 below shows the process of integrating cluster themes to formulate an emergent theme.

Table 6

Example of Cluster to Emergent Theme

Formulated Meaning	Cluster Themes	Emergent Theme
Demonstrating the love of Christ through extending encouragement and sharing faith	Fictive Kinship/Sisterhood	The missional level is where God's people will influence the greater environment.
While serving in the community inviting others to church is an opportunity to share one's faith.	Servanthood	Missional level of spiritual formation is a goal. in a believer's progressive spiritual growth (Teo, 2017).
Shares her faith by encouraging other Sorors to step out on faith and engaging them in the prayer of agreement	Fictive Kinship/Sisterhood	Christlike love for one another is evident in sharing faith

Creating a Description and Fundamental Structure

During this stage of analysis, all emergent themes were integrated into an exhaustive description. Once the themes were established, the researcher returned to the shared lived experiences from the interviews to compare comments across all categories. A reduction of findings was executed during this stage, and any descriptions found to be misused or overgeneralized were eliminated from the overall structure. A fundamental statement of structure was formulated at this stage to fully describe the phenomenon in question. The process revealed alignment with the four foci elaborated on by Chandler (2017) and Peacock (2020) as central in Black Spirituality and, in this researcher's opinion, worked in tandem with the phases of Christian spiritual growth described by Teo (2017), that are part of the transformation process of formation.

Validating the Findings

The primary means of validating the findings involved returning the interview transcript to the participants for their review and approval of the transcript's accuracy and content. The second means of member checking involved the researcher returning her research findings to the participants and discussing the results with them. Participants' views on the study results were obtained via e-mail correspondence. All participants expressed satisfaction with the results and agreed the data conclusions reflected their feelings and experiences accurately.

<div align="center">

Demographic and Sample Data

</div>

This section describes the demographics of the study's sample. Each of the participants were over 18 years old, active members of a graduate chapter and most importantly born again Christians. Table 7 shows the participants' ages, their sorority affiliation, and their years of membership. To ensure their anonymity participants' initials were used as their identifier. As indicated in Table 6, there were ten participants in the study representing three of the four sororities.

Additionally, during transcription, any mention of the participant's identity or their sorority members was denoted by ellipses in quotations "…". The transcription was sometimes paraphrased for brevity and clarity. The researcher made every effort to have all four BGLO sororities represented. Unfortunately, during the solicitation, the potential participant from Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated, became ill and was unable to complete the study. Consequently, three of the four BGLO sororities were represented in the study as shown in Table 7: (a) Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated; (b) Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Incorporated; and (c) Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Incorporated. Each of the ten participants agreed to the terms and conditions detailed in the researcher's consent form approved by the Institutional Review Board

of Liberty University before interviewing (see Appendix B). The interview schedule began May

24th, 2022 to September 30th, 2022. Before conducting each interview, the researcher would

collect information on the participants.

Table 7
Summary of Participant Demographics

Participant Identifier	Group Section	Sorority Affiliation	Length of Membership	Age	Location
3727	1	ΣΓΡ	6	39	Georgia
4434	2	AKA	50	70	Georgia
2750	1	AKA	22	45	North Carolina
4715	1	ΣΓΡ	17	40	Georgia
5615	1	AKA	3	25	Texas
2309	2	AKA	33	53	Mississippi
2707	1	AKA	11	30	South Carolina
3910	1	AKA	8	34	Texas
0827	1	ΣΓΡ	27	47	Georgia
2716	1	ZΦB	34	53	Georgia

Note. The Table above includes participants in the first and second rounds of interviews

Data Analysis and Findings

The researcher's intention in selecting the Colaizzi method for data analysis in this study

considered two significant benefits: the rigorous analysis tying data closely with each step and

the method's dependence upon rich first-person accounts of lived experiences which increases

credibility and validity. The result was a fundamental structure for a description of the

phenomenon (Morrow et al., 2015). The Colaizzi process for phenomenological data analysis

began with reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, then pulling out the significant

statements made by the participants to search for meaning and identify patterns. The formulated

meanings were categorized and became cluster themes, then filtered down to the emergent

themes. Emergent themes form a skeleton for the findings of the research used to understand the

fundamental structure, describing the spiritual formation. The finding's emergent themes reflect the progressive and reciprocal pattern given in the exegesis of spiritual formation discussed in the literature review, referencing Teo (2017). Teo's writings were built upon the established Catholic tradition of the Three Ways consisting of three distinct phases of spiritual development. The terminology describing the process of spiritual development fluctuates from the most common designations used in the Catholic tradition (purgative, illuminative, and unitive) which is often only associated with the interior transformation of a believer and is mostly descriptive. Teo uses more familiar common vernacular of personal, communal, and missional phases of spiritual growth while focusing on tangible outcomes framed by an ecological understanding of transformation. As the study's findings were examined, keeping in mind that the overall process of spiritual growth can be compared to the normative path of human development was helpful.

The developmental equivalencies when incorporated with the concept of ecological understanding that one's environment and interactions influence one's development, provide indicators of maturation. Those indicators in physical development are identifiable by outward physical changes and psychological and behavioral changes. The expectations of how and what distinguishes a child's developmental growth from adulthood are easier for most people to visualize than spiritual growth and development.

The Conceptual Framework and Presentation of the Findings

However, spiritual development is identifiable through behaviors and actions. The believer's relationship with God in prayer, worship, and meditation is a consistent and intentional part of their lifestyle. That relationship seeks out a community where a believer can flourish among like-minded people who will nurture and encourage their faith. These environments allow them to live out their faith, building fellowship through forgiveness and

accountability. The natural progression for the believer is an awareness of being a part of a greater whole so that in loving one another and posturing our hearts as servants we are in essence, embodying the very image of Christ Jesus reciprocally drawing us back to a deeper relationship with God. This researcher would like the reader to remain cognizant of this cyclical pattern as a tool to identify spiritual growth.

Since the criteria of this study require the participants to be born-again Christians, the initial level of formation on a personal level is a research assumption going forward. Connecting to Teo's (2017) first phase of spiritual growth (personal), the first emergent theme in this study's data was the participants' prayer life and their relationship with God. The second level of Teo's formation model is community transforming believers into the image of Christ after salvation, empowered by the Holy Spirit (2017). The study's second emergent theme was that of sisterhood and community. The missional level of outreach (Teo's third phase of discipleship and evangelism) personifies proclaiming God's love for the world and demonstrating love for one another (2017). The study's third emergent theme was servanthood and loving one another. The sisterhood and community described a commitment to relational bonds where believers experience loving one another and servanthood in practice. The key elements of spiritual growth are evidenced as relational, transformational, and vocational purpose (Glerup as cited in Teo, 2017):

> The Holy Spirit convicts, nurtures and affirms the relational dimension of believers as children of God (Rom. 8:15-16) before and after their conversion. The Holy Spirit continues with his transforming work through sanctification by conforming believers to the image of Christ through scriptures, the faith community, and many other life-changing events. Thereafter, the Holy Spirit will use these transformed lives to proclaim God's glory to the world through their vocations. Therefore, we can see that the Holy Spirit plays a vital role in the formation of believers to become like Christ. (para. 16)

The study examined and considered the findings through the lens of spiritual growth and formation, as outlined above, finding the emergent themes from the participants' responses. This revealed a progressive, reciprocal, and ecological understanding of spiritual formation as was previously detailed by Teo's phases of Christian spiritual formation. The researcher reported the participants' responses and noted any patterns or issues in relation to the research questions, for example, if clarification was necessary or the use of additional clarifying questions in the dialogue. The clarifying questions delved into the RQ, and were asked to elaborate further on the foundation of the RQ. The findings are formatted with the RQ at a level two heading in bold, followed by the subsidiary questions or clarifying questions identified with either SQ or CQ and connected to that RQ with a level three heading in bold italics. The RQs are in sequence, but the clarifying questions were grouped according to the emergent themes. However, all questions are presented and align with the interview protocol Appendix D.

RQ1: In what way is active engagement evidenced in a BGLO sorority with other Christian members?

Research question one and the subsidiary and clarifying questions served to flesh out the emergent themes that would form the fundamental structure of the phenomenon being explored in this study. The questions began with the spiritual practices commonly accepted as the building blocks of spiritual growth in a relationship with God. Reading this research question out loud, the researcher observed facial expressions as if participants were awaiting clarification. This became a constant pattern during the interviews, so in response to this pattern, the researcher used the subsidiary question and clarifying questions during the interview dialogue for clarification and to elicit lengthier responses. The following are the questions for RQ1. The first

emergent theme from the responses indicated consistent and intentional prayer lives, with participants connecting that prayer life to a close relationship with God.

RQ1 Subsidiary question: How often do you practice spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, silence, meditation, and service to others with members of your sorority?

While less than 20% reported fasting with other Christian members, and there was only one participant that mentioned having a moment of silence during a community service project honoring the victims of domestic violence, prayer on the other hand was a significant part of their lifestyle. All participants reported regularly engaging in several forms of prayer with other sorority members, including intercessory and corporate prayer at the local, regional, and national levels within their organizations. All participants reported that their chapter meetings, regional and national conferences, and community service outreach initiatives incorporated invocational and benediction prayers, meditation, and scriptural readings. Prayer was a powerful emergent theme throughout the interviews; these excerpts demonstrate the myriad of ways sorority members engaged in prayer.

> (0827) stated, "No matter where we are, we always go to a higher source to convene over the meeting so that we are in decency and order. Above all, being sorority sisters, we are also children of God, so we pray before we do anything."

> (2707) shared, "In my chapter, we have Manifestation Mondays and a prayer line every Monday. We gather on a conference line, organized by the chapter's Spiritual Oversight Committee, which is very active."

> (2750) explained, "At every meeting, there's always meditation or prayer. We incorporate prayer in everything that we do within our organization. It is at the center of anything we do!"

> (4715) noted, "So, we can pray and talk weekly. We get to see each other every Sunday and if I need special prayer, I call them anytime and when we have our intercessory prayer."

Others mentioned prayers unique to their organization and commonly recited across their membership or taking prayer requests and having prayers of encouragement via Zoom during the

pandemic. The researcher identified four forms of prayer prevalent among the study participants,

as illustrated in Table 8.

Table 8
The Identified Forms of Prayer
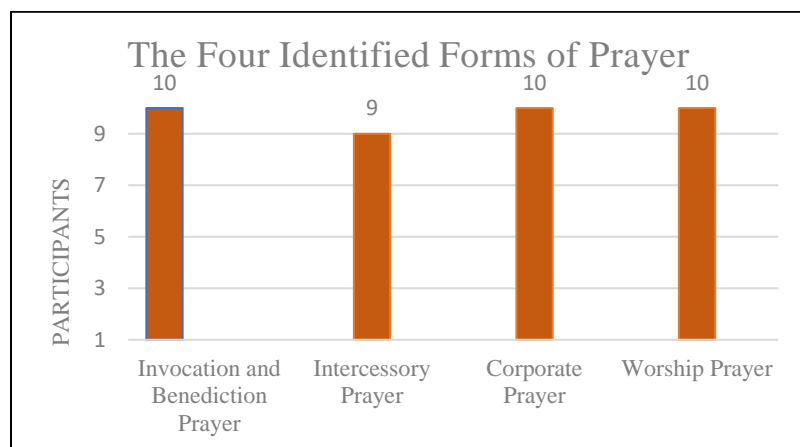
Although this research question specifically included prayer practices among the sorority

members, responses to other research questions suggested a seemingly pervasive practice of

prayer, making it a fundamental structure in the description of this phenomenon.

The following question included another of the spiritual practices, worship, specifically

asking participants about worship in a corporate setting such as a church service.

RQ1 Clarifying question: How often do you attend church services with members of your sorority?

The findings indicated that all participants attended annual ecumenical services as a

sorority function. While the researcher does not assume that the other sorority participants are

necessarily Christians, it seems that the act of worshipping with others brought about an

awareness of God's presence in the respondent's life. Some participants mentioned their local

chapters attending worship services at local congregations in their communities as a cooperative

gesture with the church or at the invitation of a sorority sister. As a participant (2309) remarked,

 "We usually would go to the chapter president's church or somebody else from the chapter. Maybe their church had something, and they would invite us so that we would support them in that way. Then after, we would all eat afterward to fellowship with one another."

However, others regularly attended church with other sorority sisters and described the closeness of their relationships resulting from their fellowship in church and bond as sorority members.

(4715) replied, "Well, every Sunday because a couple of my sorority members are members of my church! We get the opportunity to praise and worship together and we are in the Women of Wellness Ministry together as well."

(0827) reflected, "It is often because one of my close sorority sisters serves as the chaplain for our region… because I am the reason she became a member. I introduced the sorority to her. She and I go to church together."

Although 70% of the participants periodically attended church with other sorority members, each perceived this as a unique circumstance that they appeared to treasure; however, worship prayer in a congregational setting was a common experience for all participants, even if only visiting a Soror's home church. Seven out of ten had worshipped with a sorority sister in a local congregation regularly beyond attending a sorority-sponsored worship service. In fact, active engagement with other sorority sisters was another emergent theme, as the participants all were active members within their organization; a strong sense of community and sisterhood seemed to play a significant role in their lives.

RQ1 Clarifying question: How often have you actively engaged with Christian members of your sorority?

One hundred percent of participants reported at least monthly engagement with other Christian sorority members. Often in their monthly meetings, they also mentioned engagement in community service activities and socializing as sorority sisters at organization events, and on a personal level at events not sponsored by their organizations. The study criteria stipulated active

engagement, but 90% reported being very involved in sorority activities beyond the monthly

meeting, as reflected in this participant's jovial comments explaining how her preparation for

upcoming sorority events had literally and figuratively taken over.

> (2309) chuckled in self-awareness then reflected, "I was dating someone once, and the chapter was getting ready for a service project, and I just had a lot of stuff happening. I had one project this week, and then I had something else the following week. He told me it was overwhelming and jokingly said, "If I come in here one more time!" (The participant shaking her index finger) "Your house looks like you're working on the thesis or a dissertation!" (She chuckled) I had papers everywhere!"

Reaching back into the community is a central aspect of BGLO sororities, and the

following subsidiary question delves a little deeper into the frequency of their active engagement

in social and philanthropic activities.

RQ1 Clarifying question: How often do you participate in social or philanthropic activities with members of your sorority?

All interview participants reported participating monthly or bi-weekly in sorority

community service projects organized by their sorority committees. The significance of serving

was evident in their dedication to community service. While the researcher does not assume that

the other sorority participants are necessarily Christians, it seems that the participants' remarks

concerning including prayer during social or philanthropic activities acknowledge God's

presence in their endeanors. These findings corresponded with what was stated in the literature

review on BGLOs' commitment to community outreach and servanthood. Participants generally

indicated that their commitment to the sorority required significant time and energy. Still, all

noted that their commitment to engage actively was beneficial, characterized by their responses

to the subsidiary questions. The researcher used these questions to drill down on other ways they

may engage with other members.

RQ1 Subsidiary question: What is the frequency of your active engagement in mutually beneficial Christian formation with Christian members of your sorority?

The subsidiary questions under the RQ1 also grappled with exploring spiritual growth in a community of faith without religious affiliation, a unique aspect of this study. These questions further supported the emergent theme of community faith and sisterhood by inquiring about forms of fellowship through spiritual accountability, encouragement, and the practice of forgiveness with other Christians. As indicated in the earlier responses of the participants' frequent engagement in prayer was individually and mutually beneficial, the following statement reflected how that frequent engagement has benefited her.

> (2750) shared, "Prayer always gives me a place to center myself. So even in the morning, when we wake up, we are supposed to pray and thank God for the day. You have your individual time, but when you come and do it corporately in your organization, it strengthens you. It makes you better prepared for the day and makes you more ready for whatever life circumstances will occur.

RQ1 Clarifying question: How often do you fellowship with one another with a meal?

Again, all participants engaged in social interaction with Sorors frequently, whether having a meal together as asked explicitly by the question or simply bonding as friends, which is implicitly at the core of the question. However, the researcher does not assume that the other sorority participants are necessarily Christians or that their engagement in fellowship was motivated by faith in Christ. Black spirituality is characteristically distinctive because of fictive kinship and is important in building a sisterhood. While a meal is a physical activity, it is a forum for fellowship and building bonds, as exemplified in the New Testament accounts of the many times Jesus communed with his followers during a meal. Many sorority chapter committees dedicated to sisterly relations exemplified the emphasis on maintaining and fostering fellowship. Sisterhood was explored even further as the interviews progressed. Within the participants' close

friendship circles, socializing was a more frequent occurrence, but chapter-wide fellowship

occurred once, usually on a quarterly basis. The overall findings are represented by this comment

from a participant on her way to dinner with her sorority sisters following the interview.

> (0827) explained, "It just so happens that my sorority sisters are my friends, even though I have church friends and coworkers; it is different because our sorority sisters choose to be friends. We choose to be around one another. You have some sorority sisters that you'll see every 30 days at meetings or community service events. As Sorors, we are like-minded people… such that you form relationship bonds to the point where they become more like your family, so because I do not have biological sisters, some of my sorority sisters are like family to me. I see some of them at least once a week. My weekends are filled with sorority activities, whether fun or structured events. Socially, I am usually with the same group of people."

RQ1 Clarifying question: How often do you seek out accountability for your own spiritual growth?

The data revealed that 90% of the participants had an individual sorority sister or circle of

sisters with whom they had spiritual accountability, often in what could be described as

mentor/mentee relationships, as exemplified by this participant's comments.

> (2707) shared, "Most of the chapter's charter members were initiated in the same undergrad chapter even though they are older than me and pledged a decade before I even came to the university. But because of that, I was already in this mentor, mentee-type relationship with a few of them… But inside that circle of Sorors, I know that I can be wholly who I am, and I know when it comes to my spirituality and relationship with God. If there are questions or things. I have questions about, I know I have that circle I can go to outside my family."

However, a minister participant reflected that her role in the sorority as a spiritual mentor

precluded her from seeking accountability among her Sorors.

> (3727) explained, "this one is an interesting question. I'm generally on the other side because people come to me for prayer and encouragement as a mentor. After all, I am a minister. Because they know that it comes with the territory of being a support system, when you are the person that is their go-to, you do not often have that person for you to go to. So, I would not say I get accountability for my spiritual walk from my Sorors. It comes from other peers."

RQ1 Clarifying question: How pervasive is the practice of forgiving one another?

The participants' responses to this clarifying question reflect that forgiveness is central to a cohesive and functioning organization. Every participant shared their experiences coping with forgiveness and strategies employed in their chapters to mediate disputes and foster forgiveness. Here are some examples of their comments on practicing forgiveness in their sororities:

(3727) explained, "Forgiveness is a huge thing for a chapter to work. We have a mediator that acts as a go-between two parties so that they can talk things out. We created that as a part of our chapter to ensure we can keep things flowing in love."

(2750) said, "That is daily! (laughter) So we offer forgiveness anytime there is a conflict. There is an emphasis on having a corporative spirit, on being sisterly."

(2707) declared, "That is a loaded question! We are very strong-willed, powerful women; many of us are leaders in our own lives outside of the sorority. But we try to focus on the nature of sisterhood; that's why forgiveness is essential to move past disagreement."

(0827) explained, "No, it is just crazy because we teach forgiveness to women. Because we come from all walks of life, various spiritual backgrounds, financial statuses, and mental stability, and those things are composed of a woman. We teach conflict resolution because everybody does not resolve conflict the same way. The sorority has created a model to use when we bring new ladies into the organization."

These responses, along with the apparent dedication to engagement in community service noted earlier, highlight the third emergent theme of loving one another and servanthood. Next the researcher connects these findings and then aligns them with scripture to form the framework. In Matthew 18:21-22 Jesus's response to Peter's question reveals the significance of forgiveness. Two types of forgiveness appear in the Bible; God's pardon of our sins and our obligation to pardon others (Matthew 6:14-15). Forgiveness is an act of love; it is not only to pardon. God's act of love towards mankind was to send his only son as a propitiation for our sins, a supreme act of love (1 John 4: 9-10). Therefore, our act of forgiving one another reflects our transformation into his image.

While RQ1 identified the existence and the frequency of spiritual practices occurring among our participants and their sorority sisters, the next research question explored the impact of their engagement in those practices on their spiritual growth.

RQ2: How has active engagement in a BGLO sorority influenced Christian members' spiritual growth?

The researcher experienced that the participants at this point in the interviews were still reliant on the subsidiary and clarifying questions for lengthy responses. The subsidiary and clarifying questions also enabled the participants to remain focused on the heart of the questioning. Additionally, this was early in the interview process, and the richer, more narrative responses became more frequent as the conversations progressed and the interviewer and interviewees gained a rapport.

RQ2 Subsidiary question: How has active engagement in the sorority positively influenced your spiritual growth?

Clearly 90% of the participants expressed that their faith walk of spiritual growth had been strengthened because of sorority membership and active engagement with other Christians. However, the researcher acknowledges that the initial questions wording stated active engagement with Christian members and as a result there was a missed opportunity to have an explicit connection with the study's focus. They shared that their organization emphasized spirituality procedurally and had a culture that cultivated spirituality at the center of their activities, providing positive reinforcement of their beliefs. For example:

> (4434) responded, "I would say it has significantly impacted me because it gives me an added layer of connection to God. So outside of going to church or praying individually or listening to gospel music. I also have this added connection of praying with my sorority sisters or encouragement from my sorority sisters, or whether going to ecumenical service with my sorority sisters. The sorority highlights the importance of God or times when our regional director or national president will speak at our Founder's Day. It was almost like a sermonette."

RQ2 Clarifying question: How have your corporate practices of spiritual disciplines with Christian members of your sorority impacted your relationship with God?

Responses to this question yielded mixed results. Most participants expressed awareness

that God was engaged in every aspect of their lives and how that awareness had impacted their

walk of faith, so responses overlapped with the next question. There were two exceptions where

the answers seemed to respond directly.

> (3727) reflected, "It has caused my prayer life to grow. Again, I'm one of those the chapter comes to for advice, prayer, talk, or council. And so, because now I have all these people who rely on my relationship with God for counseling and guidance. It has increased my prayer life; it's grown my study life."

> (2750) stated, "Having another Christian Soror is another level of sisterhood in Christ for me. When you have Christ-minded individuals who can pray together, turn to scripture, and encourage one another in the word. I have at least four of my chapter members with whom I have those frequent text messages of prayer or encouragement, even sometimes daily and across the globe."

RQ2 Clarifying question: In what ways does your engagement in corporate church services with Christian members of your sorority influence your understanding of the presence of God in your life?

In general, the participants universally expressed that worshipping with Sorors had

influenced their understanding of the presence of God either in their own lives, as illustrated in

(2707)'s comments, or about recognizing God's presence in others's lives, as reflected by

(2309)'s remarks.

> (2707) said, "I think that it has shown me. I do not want to say shown but maybe reiterate. He is in touch with every single aspect of our lives… with going to chapter meetings and opening with a prayer saying, "Dear Lord, let our business today be pleasing in your sight." God cares about my sisterhood in Alpha Kappa Alpha and our commitment to the community; he cares about the partnerships that we create. So, learning that everything I am a part of can brings glory to him. It can please him."

> (2309) remarked, "When I see Sorors have the same spiritual mindset that I do, and I thought they were one way, then to see them in church worshipping the same way I do, and I understand that they also have a relationship with Christ. It made me feel different and gave them more grace than I probably would have if I had never had that

encounter… But then, when you are in worship and see that person having a God moment, it just makes you say, OK, God gives me grace. So let me offer that grace to my Soror."

RQ2 Subsidiary question: How has active engagement in your sorority deepened your relationship with God?

At this point in the interview process, the dialogue was conversational. As a result, responses were richer and more narrative, so there was less dependence on the subsidiary or clarifying questions. Aspects of the subsidiary or clarifying questions were often addressed without the need to ask a question. Although the researcher felt the questions in some ways overlapped, these are examples of the comments reflecting the inquiry's data patterns. However, overall, the participants' narratives of their experiences through personal stories suggest a reinforcing, strengthening, and deepening of their faith walk. (3727)'s reflections are an excellent example of this pattern. She shared how her role in the chapter as a spiritual mentor had increased her prayer and scriptural study to enable her to minister to her Sorors. She continued,

> (3727) So, it has brought me closer to God…when I came into this role. Another thing that it did was challenge me. It is one thing to say; we love people. (laughter) But when you have difficult people or personalities, it stretches that love. So, do you really have a love of God?... It challenged me to increase my walk and level of responsibility to my sisters to ensure I am a light on a hill that cannot be hidden… definitely, it has positively strengthened me."

Other participants' responses reflected that their relationship with God had been deepened by active engagement in a sorority, giving them a vehicle to fulfill God's purpose.

> (2750) shared, "As a part of a vast organization, there are specific leadership roles and activities I can participate in within our organization that always lead me back to purpose and keep me aligned with God. I can be used for his Kingdom and this organization. So, I'm grateful for the sorority where I can be in tune with him. My relationship with God and being engaged in this sorority drive purpose and the uniqueness in how I was created".

RQ2 Clarifying question: How have your lived experiences among Christian sorority sisters enhanced your relationship with God?

Participants indicated that reconnecting with God's purpose for their lives to serve others has strengthened their relationship with Jesus, recognizing that he is directing their path. At the same time, other participants' relationships with God grew as they found themselves relying on him to accomplish their roles within the sorority.

> (4434) said, "In the first place, it has helped me reconnect to why we believe in God in the first place. We are here on Earth to help those who cannot help themselves. You never know when your hard time might come, so I believe in planting good seeds."

> (0827) explained, "As the state director, you interact with so many different personalities, and I think my growth has been having patience in relationships with Sorors. It is not always easy to deal with multiple personalities trying to accomplish something. Sometimes, you have negative responses you did not necessarily foresee because I have a solid foundation in God. I lean back on it."

RQ2 Clarifying question: In what way has corporate worship with Christian members of your sorority enriched your understanding of the presence of God in your life?

One participant noted that many members in her chapter are ministers and that they regularly extend invitations to visit their churches when she attends ecumenical services or prayer, both venues for worship that she felt reassurance, in gathering with two or three, that God was there in their midst (Matthew 18:20).

> (5615) said, "I think that was the biggest thing: God is always present, and there is always someone there for you. I will get very lonely in a new city, but just the impact of knowing that people in the sorority are huge into their spirituality. The Christian values there make me feel less alone. It has positively impacted me as I continue going through my own spirituality."

This is a scriptural concept and fundamental to the spiritual formation of Christians spiritually, as described at the beginning of this chapter. The research questions focused on the Christian community, specifically having the attributes of a shared life of unity in Christ. Believers are evolving from self-interest to the biblical ideal of the community by committing

themselves to live together as the people of God. It is within the community among our sisters and brothers in Christ that they are matured; this is the transformation of iron sharpening iron (Proverb 27:17) that is revealed in the New Testaments' use of "each other" and "one another." The New Testament for example admonishes us: love one another (John 13:34), forgive each other (Ephesians 4:32), and regard each other more highly than yourselves (Philippians 2:3). We're also admonished to teach and correct each other (Colossian 3:16), encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11), pray for each other (James 5:16), and bear each other's burdens (Galatians 6:2). The outward expression of a believer's spiritual growth is then indicated by their serving of one another and submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ (1 Peter 4:10 and Ephesians 5:21).

RQ2 Clarifying question: To what extent is collective social or philanthropic engagement with members of your sorority compel you to live out your faith?

All participants described deep dedication to social and philanthropic engagement through their respective sororities. Community service was noted as one of the primary reasons for joining their sorority. Participants stated that the organizations gave them opportunities to serve a broader community than they would through their local congregation. These participant responses to this question reflect this assertion.

> (2707) explained, "I would say before joining a sorority, the primary way I gave back was financial. I would pay my tithe to the church and wasn't involved in community service. I wasn't giving back outside of giving my tithe to the church. Once I joined the sorority, well, in college, I volunteered from time to time. Once I joined the sorority, that was the time in my life when I gave back more than I ever had before I joined the sorority."

> (2309) reflected, "Well, as a Christian, you are supposed to help people, and the sorority has allowed me to serve people I may not have meet just by doing service work through the church… When I was chair of the healthcare committee, we provided services in terms of information and things that people would need to be healthy, I was not doing

that at church, so in terms of the level of service, I could provide through the sorority greater."

RQ2 Clarifying question: To what extent has corporate engagement with social justice initiatives broadened the way you live out your faith?

As Black women, marginalization and intersectionality remain a factor in their lived experiences. At the heart of this question was first to broach that the struggle for social justice is an integral aspect of the Black experience in America, as was elaborated in earlier chapters. Yet, it was also a central part of Jesus's earthly ministry. Examples of how Jesus stood up to injustice and inequality are taught in Matthew 21:12-13 and demonstrated in John 4:1-30, 39-42. In Matthew, Jesus explains our faith is authenticated by our actions. When we champion on behalf of the down-trodden, the excluded, the oppressed, and the poor, he encourages us by stating that, "Whatever you do to the poor, the hungry or the one in prison, you have done to him (Matthew 25:40). In a publicly bold act, Jesus at the well asks the Samaritan women for water and begins sharing the gospel with her (John 4:1-30, 39-42). This was an act his disciples found shocking in a time when sexism and prejudice were accepted; Jesus confronted both. Our transformative formation into his image is also demonstrated when the inward transformation is evidenced through our living out our faith.

> (2707) reflected, "When I think about my desire for social justice and economic justice and those types of things. I'm not trying to speak for God or Jesus, but I truly feel like it was the focus of his ministry… just making sure that those less fortunate have a voice and that those social outcasts were brought into our systems… Look at the life he lived! Those are the exact things he sacrificed his life for."

> (2716) said, "That is interesting from the perspective of what is right and just. As you help the least of these, you help me. It is a part of my faith; social justice fits in that space. Of course, we are a primarily African American organization, even though we do have other people of color, even people of non-color, in our chapters. Primarily, we are an organization of people of color marginalized in most spaces. So, from that perspective, it sits right at home with us."

One of the more poignantly emotional responses to this question came from a participant who explained that leaning on her faith in Christ gave her comfort in coping with and engaging in the struggle against racial and social injustice.

> (3727) shared, "We had a Soror who was killed in prison, Sandra Bland. We have done social justice things around police brutality through the sorority. It has been tough to see so many Black lives being lost and so much going on in schools (pause). It is hard if you're a human being, period, especially as African American. It has been challenging even being a believer. It is hard having faith and seeing so much tragedy (the participant's voice was shaky). It has been overwhelming. It has made me go to God because it's like, Lord, what is going on?... So just asking God to help me, help the people, and help the nation as we are experiencing this."

RQ3: How do the activities or initiatives of the sorority that these members engage in with other Christians contribute to the spiritual formation of a Christian sorority sister?

The fourth chapter of Ephesians was instructive as this study continued to forge a framework for a fundamental description of the spiritual growth among BGLO sorority members with this research question. As the researcher referred to an ecological understanding of spiritual formation, she began to see the reciprocal dynamic between Teo's communal and missional levels. In Ephesians 4:13, the Apostle Paul is calling on the body of Christ to attain unity through faith and the knowledge of God to mature to the full stature of Christ. According to Lowe and Lowe (2018), Paul uses *allēlōn* (each other or one another) language to highlight reciprocal interaction and mutual spiritual formation three times in Ephesians 4:2, 25, and 32. An ecological approach to understanding spiritual formation acknowledges one's new identity in Christ; it unifies his body, the Church, with and in him. So, in serving and loving one another, the church is functioning as his body. This cyclical development is both individually and mutually beneficial, just as with a physical body. Then, God through communities of faith, reaches the world at the mission level. Through believers the world experiences God's love when his people, transformed by the Holy Spirit to Christ's image, bring healing, social justice, and

help to those around them in need. Maturing believers are those whose spiritual formation

facilitates God's purpose and will "to work in us, among us, and through us" (Averbeck, 2010 p.

30).

These questions seemed to be the most difficult for the participants to answer, as they

struggled to identify an experience that exemplified reciprocal spiritual formation. So again, the

researcher had to lean upon the subsidiary and clarifying questions; however, the responses

revealed no specific pattern. Instead, they were collective of different experiences that got to the

core of the questions, which was whether they had experienced impacting others.

RQ3 Subsidiary question: How has your active engagement in your sorority positively influenced another Christian sorority member's spiritual growth?

Participant (3727) described herself as a spiritual mentor among her Sorors because of

her role as a minister. She shared how she is often called upon to pray and stand in agreement

with her sorority sisters concerning circumstances and situations in their lives. The positive

influence on their faith has been a blessing for her.

> (3727) declared, "The power of coming into agreement! Hold on. I am getting excited; let me calm down, whoa! (laughter), (the participant was sensing the Holy Spirit), (we paused, then continued). When we agree with each other in prayer and they see how God can move, that blesses my heart because there are different options to cope in this world, but when they are learning that they can choose Jesus. They understand they can pray about this thing—and God will answer!"

RQ3 Clarifying question: How has your corporate practice of spiritual disciplines with members of your sorority impacted another sorority member's relationship with God?

The researcher wanted to include some background information that would help shed

light on the participant's story. This question zooms in on connecting engagement in spiritual

practices and the relationship to sorority sisters directly impacting another Soror's faith. Boule is

Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated's annual international conference; it involves several

workshops, services, and ritual ceremonies, and these are times of worship and contemplation. It is because of the seriousness of these occasions that a strict dress code is enforced. There is the view that one's outward appearance reflects on one's inward posture of worship. When sorority members do not conform to expectations, there is a greater likelihood of dismissal from the gathering. The negative component of this practice has the potential to impact a person's opportunity to engage in worship with other sorority sisters, thus influencing one's spiritually formative engagement with others.

A powerful lived experience shared by the participant (MR) centered around encouraging a sorority member from the LGBTQIA community struggling with her faith who had become disconnected from the sorority. (MR) forged a close, prayerful relationship with this member and encouraged her to re-engage by attending Boule services and rituals in Orlando earlier this summer.

> (2309) explained,"I have one Soror that I am close to; she is LGBTQIA, and she is still trying to figure it out. Where God is or where she is with her other choices. And so, you know, I talk to her a lot… I've shared with her that I grew up in a very liberal church as a child, but at the same time, because I grew up in Mississippi, I have discovered that I did have some homophobia, which I've tried to work through because my core belief is that God loves us all. And that your non-belief is what keeps you from dying and seeing God… we did talked about her 25 years in the sorority Silver Luncheon being held at Boule. She had a rainbow pin. So, she asked me if I thought she should wear it? She was worried about how people would receive her, so we prayed about it. I encouraged her that it was going to be fine…She told me later that a mom walked up to her at Boule, saying that her daughter is gay and does not want to attend sorority functions anymore. Then the mom asked can she take a picture together with her, so that she could show her daughter. She was crying. I said I told you; it would be fine. At our core, we love each other."

RQ3 Clarifying question: In what ways does your engagement in corporate church services with members of your sorority influence another sorority member's awareness of the presence of God?

Participant (4715) is a choir member with her sorority sister and reflected that when they worship and minister together, the presence of God is stronger.

(4715) "When I am in church service with my other sorority sister, her name is "…." She is in the choir with me as well, but when we are in there worshiping together, you can see the closeness between the Lord and us… and the powerful effect when we minister together."

RQ3 Clarifying question: To what extent does collective social or philanthropic engagement with members of your sorority compel another sorority member to live out her faith?

Although there were no conclusive connections between the participants' philanthropic engagement and compelling other sorority members to live out their faith, the emphasis on a commitment to service as central to their sisterhood was noted.

RQ3 Clarifying question: To what extent does collective social or philanthropic engagement with members of your sorority compel another Christ follower outside the sorority?

The research question was poorly written, in hindsight there is an assumption that what is being compelled is the sharing of faith in Christ. The participants' responses indicated that they did share their faith in various ways during community service events by incorporating scripture meditation, prayer, and even a candlelight visual, but none of the participants shared being able to identify whether their engagement had compelled Christians outside the sorority. The questions did not specify in what way those individuals would be compelled, and the researcher did not pursue responses.

RQ3 Clarifying question: How has your corporate practice of the spiritual disciplines with members of your sorority impacted another believer outside the sorority?

This participant described a community outreach project held at a local park that they had organized to support and minister to victims of domestic violence. She noted that it was an uplifting experience for those in attendance.

(2716) explained, "We did prayers. We did devotions and we sang and gave testimonies. This was to bring awareness to domestic violence and speak out about it from the perspective of hope. …. It is a heavy topic, but we want people to be aware but not depressed because there is joy when you are coming out of that circumstance to encourage and be advocate for them. …but we were also intertwining service with the

spiritual elements. Things like reading scripture and devotion, praise, prayer, and testimony.

RQ3 Subsidiary question: How has your active engagement in your sorority been shared with other Christians outside of the sorority?

These two clarfying questions were both answered in the next response. The researcher

would ask these questions interchangeably during interviews since they are repetitive.

RQ3 Clarifying question: In what way does your engagement in corporate church services with members of your sorority influence another Christian outside the sorority?

This participant's experience was that the unique co-ministerial relationship she shares

with her sorority sister as part of their church's praise and worship team inspired another to join

their sorority.

> (4715) explained, "Funny, Because the pastor's daughter, just became a member and she said that watching Soror "…" and I during service and outreach helped her decision to join Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc…We were such a positive influence on her, not only in the church but outside the church when she sees us around. It is just a beautiful thought that she sees us in the church and the influence was there, chokes me up a little bit."

RQ4: How has engagement in community service and social justice with other Christian sorority members influenced your spiritual growth?

The researcher asserted that missions should be viewed as an essential component of

spiritual formation. God empowers believers through his Spirit to live according to the Spirit and

fulfill his mission. In Micah 6:8 we are instructed, "He has shown you, O man, what is good;

And what does the Lord require of you? But to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with

your God." The transformational process of spiritual formation missionally flourishes from an

overflow of one's life in Christ and his love spread abroad in our hearts. A believer's

involvement in missions is intertwined with spiritual formation because it connects us to other

Christians who receive from us and spiritually give back to us. This reciprocal pattern is explored

through these research questions on the impact of the participants' engagement. The subsidiary

questions guided the responses.

RQ4 Subsidiary question: How has active participation in community service activities with other Christian sorority members influenced Christian spiritual formation?

The participants shared a wide variety of community service outreach initiatives, from

swimming lessons for urban youth to prevent drowning to outreach to victims of domestic

violence. All the participants had dedicated themselves to servanthood, which was reflected in

the moving narratives they shared with the study.

> (2707) noted that "for me, they really go hand in hand (community service and being like Christ). I cannot say that I am a Christian and do not take care of my neighbor." She declared that it was in service to others that Jesus sacrificed his life, and his ministry was to the least of these, the outcast.

> When asked about how community service was helping to transform her in Christlikeness

(2309) responded,

> (2309) "It all just ties back to me knowing that God has placed me here to be of service and to improve people's lives whenever I can so, if that is feeding the homeless, doing social justice, providing heart health information, or back-to-school drives. It all to me is if I am improving somebody's life, I am meeting my responsibility to God, myself, and AKA."

RQ4 Clarifying question: How often do you engage in community outreach with Christian members of your sorority?

One hundred percent of the participants engaged in community outreach at least monthly

and eight out of ten were engaged in some form of sorority community service bi-weekly.

Although some members may not be Christian, the participants did not make that distinction.

Non-Christian members were discussed in four interviews, but the participants seemed to assume

that most of their Sorors were Christian. This is reflected in this participant's comments. (2309)

stated, "I live in Mississippi, so we all attend church (laughing)." The researcher understands that

faith in Christ makes us Christians not solely church attendance. The researcher would like to note that this question seemed repetitive because earlier in the interview the researcher asked about the frequency of their engagement in community outreach.

RQ4 Clarifying question: In what way has your community engagement shaped the way in which you live out your Christian faith?

> (3727) explained, "So, it has grown my faith and stretched me as a person having to be over various community service projects. It has opened gift-wise to stuff I did not even know was there in me. So, it's been a blessing."

> (2750) said, "Because the organization's motto is "Service to all mankind," Jesus, is a servant himself, and we follow his example. That aligns for me."

> (4715) stated, "Because there is always someone out there hurting worse than you… I can still go out and help somebody else. It does not always have to be monetary; we can give our time, you can give clothes; that's what pushes me, and I know it pushes some of my other Sorors. God has been a blessing to us, and we want to be a blessing to someone else."

RQ4 Subsidiary question: How has active participation in social justice projects with other Christian sorority members influenced your Christian spiritual formation?

In general, the participants' responses reflected that perhaps the research question's phrasing led to implicit responses. In a review of the interview data, the researcher did not find any responses to this question that directly addressed it but noted that the remaining subsidiary and clarifying questions collectively addressed it.

RQ4 Clarifying question: How often do you engage in social justice projects with Christian members of your sorority?

The participants' responses focused less on the frequency of participating in social justice initiatives and toward their overall commitment to social justice in their lives in general. Only one participant explained that she did not engage in social justice outreach through the sorority. But she explained,

> "When it comes to social justice issues, if you are not advocating for equality which is a lot of what is going on, are you a Christian? Because you should want all men to be equal, that is all part of social justice. Although I am not involved in many of those initiatives in the sorority, I do that at work. I am on the diversity council…as a good Christian, you would advocate for social justice."

There was a pattern of participants being actively engaged in social justice issues beyond those addressed by the sorority, with most being members of outside organizations.

> (2707) remarked, "So, I will separate this. For sorority, I am on four committees… through my job, they give us time off weekly, so I joined the National Urban League… but I have already joined the social advocacy group. Oh my God, I love social justice!"

> (2750) explained, "We are constantly involved in voter registration and N.A.A.C.P. because we are a central military area with Blacks in government."

RQ4 Clarifying question: How has corporate engagement in social justice projects enriched your relationship with God and others?

The participants remarked that their dedication to social justice initiatives was tied to their commitment to serve as the hands and feet of God. (MR)'s comments best summarize the overall sentiments.

> (2309) "I feel that God has called us to bind up the brokenhearted, set the captives free. And make sure that people are good. And for Black people voting is one of the only things we have to impact change.

The implication is that social justice is a part of living out one's faith and being Christlike. This was affirmed by (AJ)'s remarks,

> (3727) "Absolutely. I feel like we are catalysts. We Christians have been sent out into the world to bring change. I feel like the whole Bible is full of examples of social justice. Think about the changes that Jesus came in to make; I mean, seriously! If we live for him, we should also affect that same type of change… breaking yolks and destroying chains."

RQ4 Clarifying question: How has corporate engagement in community service enriched your relationship to God and to others?

Participants remarked they felt their engagement in community service made them more empathetic.

> (2716) remarked, "I feel like it has allowed me to practice forgiveness, being kind and loving, and being a light for others to see God through. It has allowed me to do those things, be empathetic and compassionate, and help those less fortunate. All of those areas have been the sorority enabling me to do that. It has also given me the opportunity to; it's interesting. What sororities do is force people with the same goal but very different personalities and ways of doing things to work together."

They also noted that community outreach was central to their faith walk as evidenced by the following statement:

> (2309) explained, "We all need assistance and may not be in terms of something as basic as your kid needs school supplies and uniforms when school has already started, but we all need a helping hand. And so, to not realize that you don't get what service is and you need to check how you are moving as a Christian so that you don't feel like it could be you at some point. Since it's not you, it is your job to help somebody else."

RQ4 Clarifying question: In what way has your service to others through social justice initiatives shaped the way in which you live out your Christian faith?

This participant's response stood out among the other responses because she directly connected how her personal level of intimate relationship with God was a sustaining force and a place of emotional comfort as she served.

> (3727) shared, "We know that the word said in the last days, we would see wars and rumors of wars, killings, and all these things. But when you are living it, it is heavy. So just asking God to help me, help the people, and help the nation as we are experiencing this. Then unbelievers question saying, "Well if God is God, why are we having to deal with these things?" Believers need to dive deep, to have the answers to these tough questions. So, they understand our faith even in the middle of tragedy and that these things were predicted.
>   Politics is challenging because a lot of the division we have seen is based on race. I am an American woman, and to see this country go to some places it has gone has been hurtful (shaky voice). But I have doubled down and taken my concerns, my hurts, my pain, and my fears to God… we have been commissioned as believers to serve others. It is repeatedly in the word of God. Serving others stems from my personal belief in God and the Word.

Concluding the Interviews with an Open Question: Is there anything you would like to share?

At the end of each interview, the researcher asked each participant if there was anything else they would like to share about their experiences in the sorority and their spiritual growth. There were many personal testimonies of Sorors having demonstrated loving-kindness toward one another. Some wanted to express their positive spiritual experiences as part of a sorority while others addressed the recent rise of former members denouncing their membership because they felt it conflicted with Christian values and scripture. These responses were significant to the study and have been included to illustrate one of the emergent themes forming the fundamental structure of the phenomenon and how active engagement with other Christians has positively impacted their spiritual growth. The three emergent themes of prayer and relationship with God, community, and sisterhood, and servanthood and loving one another were reflected in their final thoughts, especially sisterhood.

> (4715) "Personally, I could speak on something that just happened. My husband had surgery it was supposed to be a standard surgery, but he ended up being in the hospital for three days they had to put him on a ventilator! So, the prayers from my sisters came by to do wellness checks on me to see if I needed anything. If my family needed anything they would drop by and visit or say if you do not feel like cooking, we can cook for you. It was so moving and touching this did not just affect me, it affected my whole family. It showed me the love of God through these people's kindness."

> (3910) "In terms of the sisterhood, I have experienced as a part of it, when my father passed away it was a challenging time for us spiritually. Our sorority sisters rallied and sent several donations in various forms, whether it was food or money. They volunteered to serve during the repass after my father's funeral. In the ways we were supported by our sorority, but some of our church members did not support us in that way. It was powerful to see how they really came together to help us. Yeah, that is what I would say in addition.

> (2750) "I feel the questions were thorough. I hope I could convey that our sorority is very Christ-centered, and it helps us to be strengthened as Christians. That would be all I would like to say about our sorority. Thank you for the opportunity."

(5615) "I think you asked about everything. I believe that being in the sorority has helped my Christian faith, doing meditations and everything. I have seen people say it has deteriorated their faith which is always shocking to me because I just do not know how. I have experienced that it has been better; you get to practice even more in the ways I want. I think the sorority has helped and benefited me in more ways than not."

(2309) "I just would like to see us get a good grounding of who Christ is and theology and then move forward with what we already know how to do. We are all over one hundred years old, we already know how to do this, so continue to thrive and do what we should do for our communities."

(2707) "I just feel like sisterhood gives you a place of shelter. Like, I am coming to you all today. I just want to vent. I do not even need any suggestions. I want to tell you how this day went. I want to listen. Then let's all forget about it… work has made me depend on our sisterhood more, a whole lot more!"

(0827) "I have not had a conflict at all. 100% of the things we do when it comes to different rituals and ceremonies are usually biblically based. So, it made it very easy for me because I can reference those same scriptures and passages when I go to church on Sunday."

Interpretation of the Findings

This research study presents two arguments that encapsulate the finding's support for the existence of the phenomena of spiritual growth positively being impacted by active engagement in BGLO sororities with other Christian members. The emergent themes collected from the participants' interviews form a fundamental structural framework for describing how the Holy Spirit's continual work of transforming believers toward Christlikeness is a spiritual ecosystem. The researcher has repeatedly emphasized that spiritual formation must be understood from an ecological approach. An ecosystem is a structural and functional unit of ecology where living organisms interact with each other and the surrounding environment similarly so with spiritual growth and development. Once one has been born again and made alive in Christ, spiritual growth occurs in reciprocally interconnected ecosystems like those embedded in social networks such as a sorority. Furthermore, even though BGLO sororities are not religiously affiliated, the

review of the literature and this study's interviews indicate that their membership and historical roots are deeply interconnected with the church. Arguably, some might contend with the notion that Christian spiritual growth can occur in a secular organization; to this argument, the researcher refers to the concept of an ecological understanding of spiritual formation to highlight that transformation takes place in tandem internally and externally, as well as interactively with the broader social and physical environment surrounding it. Of course, the distinguishing factor is that these are Christians indwelled with the Holy Spirit and as such this is the core of the transformative spiritual growth process, which in essence must be reciprocal. All of God's creation speaks to this universal law of reciprocity and progression, which can be elaborated upon by a multiplicity of metaphors. The participants' responses demonstrated a connection between their engagement in their sororities and spiritual growth in Jesus by highlighting their devotion to prayer as practice and a coping mechanism. Also, the participants' engagement displayed a dedication to serving their communities and each other as compelled by their faith and following the example of Christ. Their closing statements reflected that their experience as part of a BGLO sorority had benefitted their faith walk.

<div align="center">**Evaluation of the Research Design**</div>

Evaluating the research design based on the orienting concepts at the core of phenomenological research utilizes a logical approach. Do the research findings fit within the three concepts of the lifeworld, essence, and epoché? Did the participants' responses lead to a fundamental description of whether active engagement in a BGLO sorority had an impact on its Christian members' spiritual growth? How can we take the findings of this study and utilize them for further research to expand its conclusions?

Phenomenological research requires a focus on people's experiences of a phenomenon to obtain details for a reflective structural analysis that ultimately reveals the essence of the experience. In other words, phenomenological research studies lived experiences to gain deeper insights into how people understand those experiences. There are three concepts around which this phenomenological study research design was oriented, each with specific elements that aided in structuring a descriptive framework fundamental to understanding how spiritual growth was impacted by active BGLO sorority membership: lifeworld, essence, and epochè.

LifeWorld

Lifeworld as a unit of analysis allows phenomena to be researched holistically and without reductionism. Reductionism does not consider how other factors interact together in influencing behavior which reduces the validity of the approach. This study design strived take a holistic approach. Some concepts of lifeworld with the following aspects proposed by Van Manen (2016) included: lived space, lived body, and lived human relations, which were a consideration in evaluating the design. One element of the lived space explores both how the space we find ourselves in can affect the way we feel and, conversely, how the way we think can affect the way we experience a particular area. This includes not only the spaces in which the participants of this study were experiencing the phenomenon of spiritual growth, such as chapter meetings, local congregations, restaurants, and community service events, but also the interview on a virtual platform. The research findings suggest that formal sorority functions like meetings or community service events are considered lived spaces where spiritual growth connections are more easily identifiable. In comparison to the questions asked participants about casual or social settings. Also, during the interviews, the location of a quiet, private, virtual lived space, face-to-face, made the interviews comfortably conversational. The researcher found that the

methodology of a phenomenological research design benefited from contextualizing the transcripts by observing factors like the tone of voice, nonverbal cues, emotions, and visually connecting with the interviewees.

Lived body as an aspect of Lifeworld refers to our physical body as a presence in our everyday lives, including all that we feel, reveal, conceal, and share through our lived body. We are always present in the world through our bodies; as such, it is through our lived bodies that we communicate, feel, interact, and experience the world. This study of BGLO sorority members revealed the participants' lived experiences as Black Christian women each one of these labels a distinct aspect of their lived bodies. This aspect was explored mainly through the questions of their engagement in matters of social justice. The responses demonstrated that their lived experiences in a physically Black body are connected to their compulsion to be a catalyst for social justice and likewise affected how live out their calling as Christians. According to Graham (2016), Black women cope with the nullification of their lived experiences. The ostracism Black women face from forces of racism, sexism, and socioeconomic status has developed an inherent reliance on spirituality for strength.

The final aspect of lifeworld relating to this study is the idea that the lifeworld is an intersubjective world in which we live in a relationship.. In these relationships, we create our social world and the meaning of our lives (Van Manen, 2016). Husserl remarks that our focus is on what we perceive rather than how we perceive it. Lifeworld deals with perspectives and experiences which should not be conflated with truths, in other words; it does not promote arguments for Husserl's phenomenological approach to be defined as relativism.

An expression of this thought is that part of one's life experience is the total of those you live it with. The participants noted that their sisterly relations and connection with the

community through outreach and as part of a local congregation were a significant part of their lives. Overall, the concept of the lifeworld in this research design fits nicely to gather these sorority members' lived experiences. The participants reiterated the intersubjectivity when they spoke of being among like-minded women. In Philippians 2:2, Paul encouraged the Philippians saying, "Make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind." Paul focuses on bringing together those in Christ to form strong community bonds.

Essence

This research study took a constructivist approach. The goal was to understand the spiritual formation and how spiritual growth is impacted by active engagement in a BGLO sorority among their Christian members. The researcher had to ponder if the essence of the experiences exists differently among this specific demographic group of Black women who are active members of Black Greek Letter Organizations and why that might be the case, taking into consideration the relevant social and cultural factors explored in the review of the literature. For example, in this way of thinking, the essence of the phenomenon of being mentored spiritually may be a form of spiritual accountability. The goal was to identify and describe how this underrepresented group in the research understands its experiences. Adding their voices to the academic discourse on spiritual growth may disrupt what has been taken for granted about understanding the phenomenon.

The researcher found that so much of the essence of the study was communicated nonverbally through facial expressions, physical gestures, or even what this researcher could best describe as unspoken knowing, but not to the detriment of describing the phenomenon. The

reader was provided anecdotal notes where necessary to convey emotion and the tone of the participants' responses.

Epochè

This type of research study was incredibly challenging because, as Van Manen (2016) pointed out, "The problem of phenomenological inquiry is not always that we know too little about the phenomenon we wish to investigate, but that we know too much" (p. 46). Researchers are advised to reflect throughout their studies, which this researcher addressed using a reflexive diary, explicitly confronting beliefs, biases, assumptions, and presuppositions to deliberately acknowledge and challenge them for unduly influencing the study. The research questions and the reflexive diary allowed the researcher to focus solely on what the interviewees were saying and follow up, keeping the interviews as the central focus of the inquiry.

CHAPTER FIVE

Overview

This segment of Chapter Five describes the Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications developed by this researcher from her findings, considering both essence of the phenomenon and theoretical literature. The discussion addresses the following: previous corroborating research, and how this study diverges from the previous research and contributes to the field by shedding new light on the topic.

Research Purpose

This phenomenological study explored how active engagement with other Christians in a Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO) sorority impacts the spiritual growth of its Christian members. One of the subsidiary issues explored was the influence of relationships within their sororities that may impact their journeys as Christians striving to become Christ-like. This is the will of God for all believers (*New King James Version*,1982/2021, 2 Cor. 3:18). The definition of Christian spiritual formation has evolved from the traditional Catholic emphasis on the practices of prayer, Bible reading, and fasting (Sheldrake, as cited in Teo, 2017) to a broader understanding of a spiritual development process. For this study, these practices helped evaluate spiritually beneficial formative engagement. Willard (2002) noted that spiritual formation could occur for every person, believing that every human spirit is influenced by the spiritual realm or by sociocultural factors. Willard (2002) draws the distinction that Christian spiritual formation requires being a born-again, spirit-filled believer in Christ. Wilhoit (as cited in Teo, 2017) affirms Willard's point and adds that a person is influenced either positively or negatively, and that the formational process takes place constantly throughout one's life. These practices served

as the guide for the research questions, with emphasis on corporate engagement. An element of community in spiritual formation is the corporate engagement involved in loving one another. It involves taking inventory of believers' walk of faith with God while healthily forming meaningful communal relationships with others, often evidenced through missional outreach like community service (Von Gunter, 2021). Additionally, it involves examining corporate engagement through communal, spiritually formative practices among members. As explained by Tang (as cited by Teo, 2017), the goals of spiritual formation include the following: first, believers transformed into Christlikeness on the personal or individual level; then, believers demonstrate evidence of that transformation as they become a people of God through community engagement; lastly, believers engage in the work of establishing and expanding the Kingdom of God at the missional level through outreach and service (p. 142). Zscheile (2012) suggests that the "missional church views mission as definitive of what the church is because the church is a product of and participant in God's mission" (p. 6). Therefore, missions constituted evidence of the transformative objective of Christlikeness affirmed in Matthew 20:28. Missional community outreach is the core of BGLOs; how then is their participation in missional outreach an outward expression of their spiritual formation progression (Teo, 2017, para. 9-10)?

Research Questions

RQ1. In what way is active engagement evidenced in a BGLO sorority with other Christian members?

Subsidiary question: How often do you practice the spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, silence, meditation, and service to others with Christian members of your sorority

Subsidiary question: What is the frequency of your active engagement in mutually beneficial Christian formation with Christian members of your sorority?

RQ2. How has active engagement in a BGLO sorority influenced Christian members' spiritual growth?

Subsidiary question: How has active engagement in the sorority positively influenced your spiritual growth?

Subsidiary question: How has active engagement in your sorority deepened your relationship with God?

RQ3. How do the activities or initiatives of the sorority that these members engage in contribute to the spiritual formation of a Christian sorority sister?

Subsidiary question: How has your active engagement in your sorority positively influenced another Christian sorority member's spiritual growth?

Subsidiary question: How has your active engagement in your sorority been shared with other Christians outside of the sorority?

RQ4. How has engagement in community service and social justice with other Christian sorority members influenced your spiritual growth?

Subsidiary question: How has active participation in community service activities with other Christian sorority members influenced your Christian spiritual formation?

Subsidiary question: How has active participation in social justice projects with other Christian sorority members influenced your Christian spiritual formation?

Research Conclusions, Implications and Applications

Since the objective of phenomenological research is to gain understanding of the essence of the lived experiences of those being studied, the research questions seek to gather narratives and fundamentally form meaning. Then, properly formed conclusions must be focused not on quantitative means like statistics or comparisons but on viewing the findings from the perspective of the theories proposed in the literature review formed themes.

Research Conclusions RQ1

The purpose of the study specifically targeted actively engaged Christian members of BGLO sororities, and RQ1 delved into the spiritual aspects of their engagement, inquiring about

the frequency and type of engagement in spiritual practices like prayer, worship, meditation and fasting with other Christian members and whether they felt these experiences were mutually beneficial spiritually. The frequency and diversity in the ways that participants engaged in prayer with other Christian sorority members, as discussed in Chapter Four, indicated that the essence of prayer was a core element of the spiritual growth. Prayer was incorporated into how their organizational meetings were conducted in the form of benedictions and closing prayers, which is a common practice as part of local, regional, and national meetings. Additionally, prayer was a vehicle for fellowship among the women as they formed prayer lines, prayer chains, and procedures for submitting prayer requests to meet the needs of their sisters. This emphasis on corporate prayer indicates the emergent theme that prayer is essential to developing a personal relationship with God. This is where believers form an intimate bond with the Lord, learning his true nature of love and learning that he is where they gain guidance and strength for living; these things connect with the theological and theoretical theories proposed in Chapter Two.

The participants spoke of ministering to one another in prayer to support their sisters as they cope with their families' deaths, social justice issues, sexual identity, and illness, and strengthening their walks of faith. RQ1 asked about various spiritual disciplines, and those responses were elaborated upon in the previous chapter. This researcher centered her conclusions around RQ1 on prayer because it was both prevalent and ubiquitous in relation to examining the phenomenon of spiritual growth being positively impacted in a BGLO sorority, as explored through the theories proposed in the literature review. Prayer is a significant aspect of Black Spirituality, according to Taylor et al. (2009); from the African cultural perspective, spirituality is a central organizing framework and an essential characteristic of the African-centered worldview that shapes both the individual and communal consciousness of persons of African

descent. Coupling that Afro-centric perspective with a theologically ecological perspective on spiritual formation in community as proposed Lowe and Lowe (2018) concerning spiritual contagion which states that the social connections we have with others in the body of Christ partakes of those connections and interactions which are necessary for spiritual growth and influence. The reader can see how the subsequent questions were used to extract richer responses to RQ1—attending church together, spiritual accountability with one another, meals together, and practicing forgiveness—were aimed at fleshing out those social connections that foster social contagion.

Research Conclusions RQ2

Spiritual growth is a continuous process throughout the life of a believer, an internal transformation that manifests in external forms. Jeffrey Greenman noted that spiritual growth involves, "our continuing response to the reality of God's grace shaping us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit" (as cited in Smith III & Zondervan, 2011). The phenomenon of spiritual transformation internally and externally takes place in tandem with the individual believer but also in synchronicity with the ecological world around it. In Chapter Two, the researcher used a nature analogy, inspired by childhood memories of Fern Gully in Jamaica, to describe how this spiritual formation can be visualized. The gully, with its large mature trees that create a beautiful green canopy, is supported by an unseen system of interconnected and intertwined roots and vines, burrowing deeply into the ground and across the earth's surface beneath them, simultaneously spanning out in every direction. The researcher in RQ2 explored the participants' awareness of the presence of God in their lived experiences (that unseen system) because of their engagement in a BGLO sorority (the interconnected and intertwined roots) and

asked them to reflect on how that engagement has positively impacted their spiritual growth (the outward spanning vine).

In Chapter Four, the participants shared that their sororities emphasized spiritual practices as part of their social culture and they felt this strengthened their spiritual growth as part of these activities. They shared it did positively reinforce their beliefs, the responses derived by the subsidiary and clarifying questions dug deeper into those connections. There seemed to be a recognition that their roles within the sorority either as committee chairs, officers or participants in community projects caused them to draw upon their relationship with Christ, particularly in prayer but also in their study of scripture. They noted that the demands of their engagement challenged them to love, serve, and forgive others in ways that helped them experience and exhibit the love of God. They reported feeling compelled by their faith in God to be the hands and feet of Christ. These responses reflected the findings discussed by Clarke and Brown (2011), whose study reported that 93.8% of BGLO members had experienced the presence of God in their lives, and 85.9% stated that their religious beliefs influenced other dealings in their lives.

Research Conclusions RQ3

Christian members indicated as Parr (2021) noted that positive spiritual growth progression can be examined through the participants' lived experiences in communities of faith because they represent a measurable aspect of an outward expression of inward transformation. The dictionary defines a community of faith as a community of people sharing the same religious faith for these participants who are born again Christians they repeatedly spoke of being among like-minded women of faith. Another defines a flourition of a community of faith as one that understands how important it is to pray for one another, which, as already discussed, was a common practice among these Christian women. Lastly, communities of faith are defined by

their ability to strengthen your faith in difficult times or times of trouble. The participants shared

testimonies of how Sorors and the sorority had ministered what the researcher calls soul care, in

the form of preparing meals for ill Sorors, serving as ushers at a Sorors father's funeral and

organizing his repass, or even forming a search party for a Soror who went missing while

experiencing postpartum depression. These testimonies evidenced support in times of trouble.

RQ3 asked the participants to share how the sorority's activities or initiatives contributed

to the reciprocal spiritual formation of its Christian members. In the literature review, the

research referenced Tang's (2014) three goals of Christian spiritual formation: believers

acquiring a Christlikeness at the personal level, becoming a people of God at the community

level, and believers establishing the Kingdom of God at the missional level. The community

level is at the heart of RQ3 and is best summarized by Teo (2017) who notes that spiritual

formation is the ongoing process where believers learn and develop the right relationships with

God, self, and others as they spiritually act and behave in Christlikeness. The unified body of

believers exemplifies the formative process as we seek to grow in Christ with one another.

Although the body comprises multiple members, each with its purpose and perspective, only in

unity can the body function and grow (*New King James Version*,1982/2021, Eph. 4:4-6). The

imagery of a body composed of many members perfectly illustrates Christians' experience of

spirituality within communities of faith and the world around them.

Participants spoke of the strength they drew from agreeing in prayer with their Sorors or

even one circumstance of praying, encouraging, and mentoring a Soror grappling with her sexual

identity as a believer. They also gave accounts of how they had been edified and supported by

Sorors in their time of need and the significance of sisterhood in coping with the vicissitudes of

life. There was a profound dedication to service evident whether meeting the needs of their

community, global outreach, to one another as Sorors, or addressing issues of social justice and empowerment; the participants all were devoted to servanthood, viewing it as their purpose and so reflecting reciprocity.

Research Conclusions RQ4

This study's intentionality in selecting to explore BGLO sororities was centered around the gap in the research literature focused on Black women and the lack of their voices in academic research concerning spiritual growth, a demographic that has long standing deep ties to spirituality and high levels of religious observance. The significance of this gap is accentuated by current concerns facing the American churches' declining attendance, making understanding the phenomenon among this demographic salient. The literature established Black spirituality is characterized by specific cultural nuances, that an integral part of Black religious discourses on spirituality, holiness, worship, scriptural interpretation, and social activism is seen as the work of the indwelled Holy Spirit; noted by Theologian Barbara A. Holmes (as cited by Adams, 2014). The Black women's role as the backbone of the Black church and the church's role as the community cornerstone is inextricably tied to the sociocultural factors of racism, oppression, and injustice that have impacted the Black community. Therefore, the study of BGLO sororities Christian members specifically presented an advantageous research population of organizations with long-standing ties to social activism and the church; to examine how engagement in community service and social justice engagement with other Christian members influenced spiritual growth.

As noted in the discussion of the previous research questions, service to others was a major theme in all the participants' interviews, with many citing serving the community as the primary reason for joining these organizations. RQ4 asked the participants to reflect on how that

engagement has impacted their spiritual growth; however, the researcher presented the question highlighting social justice. This was to extrapolate responses that addressed those cultural nuances spoken of by Barbara Holmes. Each participant remarked that being Christlike meant striving against social injustice and advocating for the marginalized while conveying that faith and racial identity drove their belief. Each of the sororities' principles is rooted in servanthood The principles of the four Divine nine sororities living out Dubois's mantle to serve their race. The interviewees that one of if not their sole motivation for being part of a sorority and remaining actively engaged was a personal faith-driven dedication to servanthood. That as Black women their dedication to service means being servant leaders, so many participants were actively engaged in social justice initiatives through their sororities and outside organizations like the NAACP, and National Urban League. They lobbied for issues like criminal justice reform, registering voting, and fair and equitable healthcare for women of color. One participant thoughtfully connected her dedication to social justice as mirroring Jesus by "speaking truth to the power."

Concluding Interview Comments

After concluding the interview questions, the researcher asked the participants if there was anything else they wanted to say concerning the topic or as part of their transcript. The strength of these responses solidified the researcher's conclusions on the findings.

Theoretical Research Conclusions

After having employed the Colaizzi method to elicit emergent themes, forming a fundamental structure for explaining this phenomenon, the researcher found the themes aligned with the Christian spiritual formation outcomes elaborated on in Teo's article. Palmer (as cited in Teo, 2017) lists three areas that shape one's spiritual formation: "the study of sacred texts, the

practice of prayer and contemplation, and the gathered life of the community itself" (p. 55). The alignment with Palmer's three areas was an expected finding since the research questions were influenced by the spiritual formative outcomes outlined by Teo. There was clear evidence of dedication to prayer, likewise study of the Bible, and most significant emphasis on the bonds of sisterhood and service to the community. Teo's outcomes reflect an ecological progressive and reciprocal concept of spiritual growth, which is the theological theory for this study. According to Tang (as cited in Teo, 2017), the goals of spiritual formation include the following: first, believers transformed into Christlikeness on the personal or individual level; then, believers' evidence that transformation as they become a people of God through community engagement; lastly, believers engage in the work of establishing and expanding the Kingdom of God at the missional level through outreach and service (p. 142). As the believer grows in community and matures in Christlike servanthood to others, in cyclical fashion they continually grow like the nested ecology described by Edward Wimberley, as referenced in Lowe and Lowe (2018):

> As a "nested ecology" consisting of an interlocking set of systems that begin at the level of the self and progressively extend to encompass families, groups, communities, ecosystems, the biosphere, and beyond into the unfathomable reaches of the cosmos (p. 13).

The research sought to explore whether Christian BGLO sorority members' lived experiences reflected this theory. The results suggest that while there were some questions whose wording may have been awkward in hindsight, requiring clarification or support from the subsidiary questions, the resulting narratives navigated the researcher toward the propositions implied by the theological theory outlined in the review of literature. Active engagement in BGLO sororities, in the words and experiences of the participants, has impacted their spiritual

growth as Christians in terms of prayer and their personal relationship with God, servanthood and loving one another, and community outreach and building community through sisterhood.

At the same time, the researcher overlapped Black feminist thought as a theoretical framework because the study's focus sought to explore the unique influences on Black women's spiritual formation in recognition that those families, groups, communities, ecosystems, and biospheres noted by Wimberley interact with sociocultural and racial realities that form Black women's lived experiences. Collectively, the responses, and especially the participants' closing statements, support that active engagement in a BGLO sorority has positively impacted their spiritual growth as Christian members. Spirituality is a central organizing framework and an essential characteristic of an African-centered worldview that shapes the individual and communal consciousness of persons of African descent (Brome et al., 2000; Jagers & Smith, 1996; Maynard-Reid, 2000). The communal consciousness was evident in BGLO sorority members' accounts of lived experiences engaging in community outreach, service, and uplift.

If the essence of spiritual growth is the maturing of the believer into the image of Christ, then his attributes, mission, and behaviors should be evident and identifiable among those called by his name, Christians. It must be adamantly emphasized that this transformation is the work of the Holy Spirit. The defining distinction of Christian spiritual formation is the indwelling of his spirit in the born-again believer. The participants' lived experiences in their own words suggest that active engagement in a BGLO sorority, involving service to others, fostered fellowship, nurtured spiritual maturation individually and in the community, and positively impacted their spiritual growth. Spiritual formation is a continuous process throughout the life of a believer, being both an internal and external phenomenon that takes place in synchronicity with the ecological world around it.

Empirical Research Conclusions

Now the stated objective of a phenomenological study is to seek to understand and describe the universal essence of a phenomenon, and in this study to more specifically, focus on the commonalities of a lived experience within a particular group. BGLO Christian sorority members who participated in this study believed that the catalyst for their commitment to service stemmed from their faith walk with Jesus, modeled after him. Many participants expressed the sentiment that they were fulfilling their purpose. As Black women, there were some common themes in their spiritual development regardless of the sorority, the participant's age, location, or length of membership. There was a devotion to prayer, honoring sisterhood in a manner that was familial and profound, and a strong sense of commitment to the community with each other and the broader community. The mantle placed on BGLOs by W.E.B Dubois, in his theory 'the talented tenth' as explained in Chapter One, proposes that the ten percent of the most highly educated and talented of the Black race would become the leaders of the community and facilitate racial uplift. The principles of the four Divine nine sororities exemplify that mantle's call to action as expressed in mottos and principles:

- Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. "A community-conscious, action-oriented organization"

- Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. "Greater Service, greater progress"

- Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. "Scholarship, Public service, and Sisterhood"

- Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. "Service to all Mankind."

Theoretical Research Implications

This study was conducted because of the obvious lack of Black women's voices in the research of BGLOs, and, likewise the lack of their lived experiences voiced in their own words.

A phenomenological approach is an excellent starting point for unexplored nuances while building upon previous research. In the review of literature, the researcher found that the leading voices on the topic of BGLOs are predominantly male and likewise the focus of their research. The most substantial study *Faith and Fraternalism,* published over ten years ago, was part of a larger collection on Black fraternities that made only minimal mention of sororities. However, their research did not explore specifically connecting their active engagement with spiritual development, nor did their work focus on amplifying the voices of Black women. Appiah (2019) noted, "there was comparatively little attention given to spiritual formation and contemplative spiritual disciplines in African American literature or specifically addressing the Black context" (p. 2).

The researcher views this study as the beginning of what she hopes is a longer, broader conversation. The intent is to encourage future research that seeks to include the voices of the marginalized and the underrepresented in the broader field of academic research. The previous research studies acknowledged Black women's intersectionality and their spirituality, yet not how those things are interconnected, specifically in the practical context of living. In other words, there is recognition that spirituality is a coping mechanism employed by Black women to deal with the effects of marginalization. In a nationwide research poll by The Washington Post, the Kaiser Family Foundation took a comprehensive look at Black women's lives across decades, revealing that nine out of ten Black women cope by relying on their faith (Labbe-Debose, 2012). This study adds to the discourse an awareness of this phenomenon that can be expanded upon in future studies.

Another theoretical implication of this research study involves expanding upon the concept of spiritual formation from an ecological perspective, so that the discourse

acknowledges and examines the cultural nuances that impact a believer's spiritual formation. This study adds to the insights on how those influences edify and unify the body of Christ. The literature and this study's findings support the proposition that a significant part of a believer's spiritual growth occurs in community. Mattis, as cited in Lowe & Lowe, (2018) declared,

> It is critical that scholars take an ecological approach to studies of spiritual maturity . . . An ecological approach to the study of spiritual formation means that we zoom out and study the subject less from an individualistic orientation and more from a corporate perspective. (p. 207)

This sparks questions of what can be learned about the nature of God and our relationship to him and each other from a diversity of lived experiences. This study revealed many avenues that future researchers could take forward, for instance, how faith is a counter-space for coping with intersectionality and how that dynamic manifests among various ethnic, social, and gender groups. Perhaps another area of future research could be examining conflicts among BGLO members and their walk of faith or understanding the nature of God through engaging in soul care among Black women.

Empirical Research Implications

The empirical implications were not directly stated by the participants but suggested by the things that were observed by the researcher via the virtual interviews. The participants shared testimonies of how sorority sisters had ministered to them and their families in emotional and poignant stories that conveyed Christlike love for one another. One participant whose father battled cancer for a year and finally succumbed to pneumonia described how her sorority sisters helped to organize and arrange for his funeral. They served at the repass and sustained her entire family with prayer, meals, and fellowship. As the participant described this testimony the researcher noted the emotion welling up in her voice and her eyes watering, the impact of her

Sorors' kindness obviously profoundly touched her. There were several times during these interviews the participants' gestures and facial expressions emphasized the emotions behind their narratives and sometimes conveyed a knowing look that implied a common understanding of social experiences and issues like microaggression and cultural traditions. An example was (TT) who shared that her relative passed in another state and that she had requested time off to attend the funeral. She asked to begin the time off in a few weeks, a fact that seem to bewilder her co-workers. Their response bothered her as they persisted, questioning her as to why her family was delaying the burial, assuming it was due to financial difficulty and her having to explain that usually burials take place within a week or two to allow distant family to attend. The intrusive questioning was insensitive. The researcher interrupted, knowing that traditionally families wait to gather because of distance and recognizing the discomfort she had to have felt explaining herself. The participant responded with a gesture and a facial expression that conveyed the researcher had automatically understood. This type of intangible communication speaks to cultural awareness as a significant aspect of research.

Theoretical and Empirical Research Applications

While the conclusions and implications were delineated separately, the researcher chose to address the applications together to illustrate how they work together because central to the entire study is the universal theme of community. Early in the research process, Teo's explanation of Christian Spiritual Formation profoundly influenced this researcher. Teo (2017) proposed that "the transformational model will lead believers through an intentional process of spiritual formation where they will grow in spiritual maturity and become missional in their outlook of life and usage of resources" (para. 21). His statement spoke to the researcher's knowledge about BGLOs' history of service in the Black community. The inquiry of this study

became whether there would be evidence that their active engagement in missional community service and other spiritual disciplines was compelled by faith, making a case for investigating spiritual growth being impacted by active engagement in BGLO sororities. This research's finding that active engagement in a community of faith can be defined beyond the church walls extends to the broader body of Christ and wider community outside the church. Hawkins and Parkinson, as cited in Teo (2017), have also confirmed this through their research of over 1,000 churches, facing the issue that more than 25% of their congregants feel stalled in their spiritual growth because of the lack of spiritual formation processes to direct or assist them in their spiritual maturity. Christians' engagement in organizations, whether distinctly religious or non-religious, will inevitably influence a Christian's spiritual growth. Willard (2002) noted that spiritual formation occurs for every person. He makes the distinction that Christian spiritual formation requires being a born-again, spirit-filled believer in Christ. Wilhoit (as cited in Teo, 2017) affirms Willard's point adding that a person is influenced either positively or negatively and that the formational process takes place constantly throughout one's life.

Accountability and forgiveness actively practiced in the context of community, as described by the participants, fosters maturation in the life of a believer and promotes unity among believers. Although these two concepts seem in opposition to one another at times, they are two-thirds of the kingdom's operational administration, which can only function through the last third of grace. Believers' participation and involvement in nurturing faith communities allows them to experience true unity and relational life like that within the Trinity (Demarest, 2010). As noted by Teo (2017), "The Holy Spirit convicts, nurtures and affirms the relational dimension of believers as children of God (Rom. 8:15-16) before and after their conversion" (para. 18). Accountability and forgiveness are the cornerstones of growing in relationship with

God as we partake in the kenosis of rebirth, knowing that for the believer as in Psalms 51:17 God draws near to a broken heart and a contrite spirit. Jesus modeled this humility in fulfillment of Micah 6:8, "to seek justice, love, mercy, and walk humbly with your God." The activities and initiatives of BGLOs exemplify this scripture.

Service to one another and the world around us is an outward expression of an inward transformation and honors our call as believers to be servant leaders in Christlikeness. Teo (2017) states, "Thereafter, the Holy Spirit will use these transformed lives to proclaim God's glory to the world through their vocations" (p. 143). In this context, defining vocations as more than just someone's occupation but also that which requires great dedication. Believers become like the description of Christ in Matthew 20:28. In this sense, believers fulfill scripture's characterization of believers in John 13:34-35 that we will be known as his followers by loving as he loved us and our love for one another. The participants' responses repeatedly reinforced their dedication to service, with many finding their purpose and experiencing personal revelations like (TL) when she described developing greater compassion for victims of domestic violence because of volunteering at a shelter through her sorority. This is an exemplar of the compassionate love of Christ developing in the life of a believer. These theoretical and empirical applications broaden the discourse of spiritual formation to include settings outside the church walls, including diverse perspectives considering cultural nuances. Research topics for future scholarship could be from the approach that ethnicity and spirituality are interconnected and honors God's call in Luke 14:38 to serve one another and fulfills the heavenly vision in Rev. 7:9 of a multi-ethnic kingdom. Mutually benefitting one another by uplifting the marginalized segments of the body of Christ must be seen as essential rather than ancillary. Teo reflected,

"they will reap the benefits of spiritual growth and maturity as they live with the diversities and differences that exist among themselves" (Teo, 2017, para. 19).

Research Limitations

As with all research studies, there are limitations, which was the case for this study. The primary limitation was time constraints because qualitative research relies on interviews. Those interviews are difficult to secure due to the time commitment and participants having to member-check transcriptions. Securing interviews was daunting for this researcher, although fifteen participants responded to solicitations to participate in the study. One withdrew due to illness, two stopped responding to emails, and two never showed up for the interviews. There were also occasions when the researcher had to be flexible about start times that conflicted with their schedules or rescheduling two or three times and dealing with time zones. The researcher grappled with saturation at the point when solicitations stopped yielding participants. The researcher also had to navigate technical difficulties with technology and some participants unfamiliar with Microsoft teams. Additionally, the researcher sought representation from each of the four Divine Nine sororities, but unfortunately, only members from three of the four Divine Nine sororities participated. The final limitation of phenomenological studies is that generalizations from such a small population sample are dubious. The findings should be seen as preliminary. However, this researcher has taken the stance that this study's purpose was to provide a detailed description of phenomena of spiritual growth among Christian BGLO sorority members to spark additional discussion and research. The findings therefore should be not be seen as conclusive but rather that an emerging description of the essence of the phenomenon was accomplished.

Further Research

In terms of furthering this research topic, this researcher suggests an ethnographic study which would entail a systematic observation process, interviews, documentation of the life, and cultural patterns in the subject's familiar environment. This study would provide an even more in-depth view of the phenomena of spiritual formation among Christian BGLO members. In terms of gaining an even greater understanding of the transformational changes that occur in the lives of believers, a longitudinal study would provide the best record of how active engagement influences BGLO members' spiritual growth over a lifetime. A broad sample of BGLO sororities from the whole country might reveal different experiences. Likewise, it would be helpful to take any one of the findings and focus on it as a research study, for example the ways that prayer among BGLO sorority sisters is used to counter intersectionality. This researcher feels that further exploring the aspects of soul care among Black women and the historical precedence for that in their social networks would reveal a further understanding of spiritual development.

Summary

The phenomenon of Christian spiritual growth, as impacted by active engagement in a BGLO sorority with other Christians, was grounded in the following conclusions drawn from the research. The emphasis on prayer was an interwoven part of their lives and their membership. It demonstrated a strong relational bond with God because they sought to incorporate his presence through prayer in their everyday activities. Moreover, they turned to prayer as a mechanism to cope and to minister to one another in times of need. This is empirical evidence of a relationship and reliance on faith in God.

The ministry of serving one another is evidenced in their bonds of sisterhood exemplified by their descriptions of familial bonds strengthened via having meals together the practice of

forgiveness, and spiritual accountability. One participant's comments reflected the intentionality in building a unified sisterhood, "So, this is a choice that you have chosen to give your time and attention to ensuring that these are cohesive relationships." This sentiment is fully in alignment with spiritual formation from a biblical perspective that establishes a unified body in Christ made of many members is part of our transformation (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). Jesus tells us in John 13:35 that this is how we will be known as his disciples, by our love for one another.

It is God's intent that we are in a relationship with him and others. The concept of relationship is the primary takeaway from this study; its significance is at the core of spiritual formation, the premise for establishing BGLO sororities, and the foundational emergent theme defined by this study of community. Community manifests in the actions of these organizations. The participants' active engagement extends beyond church services into every facet of life. One participant described it as becoming the hands and feet of Jesus.

Spiritual formation is reconciliatory, helping the believer to grow in the relationship with God as it was meant to be. It's not trying in self-effort but the inner working of the Holy Spirit in cooperation with a submitted spirit, training in eternal living, determined discipleship to Jesus Christ, and the pathway to renewal in his image (2 Cor 4:16). This researcher views this study as a starting point for further research expanding the scope of discourse on spiritual formation.

A personal insight acquired while conducting this research serves as an excellent way to encapsulate the significance of broadening the discourse to be more inclusive of the marginalized or even seemingly less significant segments of the church, which was one of the arguments this research encountered during the peer-reviews of the research topic development. After having had half of both her feet amputated, the researcher underwent several adjustments. The loss gave a new perspective on the significance and use of toes that could only be understood in their

absence. How one balances, what helps keep a shoe on, and even the impact of missing

appendages on other parts of the body. In a very visceral sense, this physical experience

enlightens the spiritual discussion of this study. Spiritual development is a communal endeavor

meant to be beneficial and edifying for the whole body of Christ.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Consent Form

Title of the Project: A Phenomenological Study of How Active Engagement in Black Greek Letter Sororities Influences Christian Members' Spiritual Growth
Principal Investigator: Lorraine Aragon, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years old or older, an active member of a Black Greek Letter Organization graduate chapter for at least two years, a Christian, from the Southern region of the United States, and identify as a Black woman. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

This study will explore the lived experiences of Christian sorority members who are actively engaged in Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs) and how their memberships influence their journeys as Christians striving to become Christ-like which, according to 2 Corinthians 3:18, is the will of God for all believers.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:
1. Participate in a 45–60 minute, virtual, audio-recorded interview.
2. Participants will have an opportunity to review their interview transcript to confirm accuracy.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

In the context of the broader discourse, research focused on Black women voicing their lived experiences is a gap in academia, so this study will contribute to the diversification and inclusion of more perspectives.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential using pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. The password-locked computer will be stored in a locked cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Hard copy data will be shredded after 3 years. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Lorraine Aragon. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ███████████████ or by phone at ███████████. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, ███████████████.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations.
The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

Appendix B

Email Recruitment Letter

Date
Jane Doe
Basileus
ABC Sorority
P.O. Box 12345
City, State 12345

Dear Basileus,

As a doctoral candidate in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of a doctoral degree requirement. My study explores whether membership in a Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO) is beneficial or detrimental to their spiritual growth through participants' lived experiences, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

In addition to being 18 years or older and an active BGLO graduate chapter member for at least two years, participants must be Christian, from the Southern United States, and identify as Black women. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in a virtual, audio-recorded interview with the researcher. It should take approximately 45-60 minutes to complete the interview. Participants will have an opportunity to review their interview transcript to confirm accuracy. Names and other identifying information will be requested for this study, but participant identities will not be disclosed.

To participate, please contact me at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or email ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ for more information and to schedule an interview.

A consent document will be sent via email one week before the interview. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me before the interview via email.

Sincerely,

Lorraine Aragon
Ed.D. Candidate
John W. Rawlings School of Divinity
▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

Appendix C

Divine Nine Recruitment Post for The Greek Social Network Pages

ATTENTION DIVINE NINE SORORITY MEMBERS: I am conducting a research

study as part of the requirements for a Doctorate in Christian Leadership at Liberty University.

Participants must be 18 years or older, an active member of a BGLO graduate chapter for two

years, a Christian from the Southern United States, and identify as a Black woman. Participants

will participate in a virtual interview online that will be audio-recorded. It should take

approximately 45-60 minutes to complete the interview. Participants will have an opportunity to

review their interview transcript to confirm accuracy. If you would like to participate and meet

the study criteria, please direct message me or contact me at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ for more

information and to schedule an interview. A consent document will be emailed to you one week

before the interview.

Appendix D

Interview Protocol

RQ1: In what way is active engagement evidenced in a BGLO sorority with other Christian members?

Subsidiary question: How often have you actively engaged with Christian members of your sorority?
   a. How often do you practice the spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, silence, meditation, and service to others with members of your sorority?
   b. How often do you attend church services with members of your sorority?
   c. How often do you participate in social or philanthropic activities with members of your sorority?

Subsidiary question: What is the frequency of your active engagement in mutually beneficial Christian formation with members of your sorority?
   a. How often do you seek out accountability for your own spiritual growth?
   b. How often do you fellowship with one another with a meal?
   c. How pervasive is the practice of forgiving one another?

RQ2: How has active engagement in a BGLO sorority influenced Christian members' spiritual growth?

Subsidiary question: How has active engagement in the sorority positively influenced your spiritual growth?
   a. How has your corporate practice of the spiritual disciplines with members of your sorority impacted your relationship with God?
   b. In what way does your engagement in corporate church services with members of your sorority influence your understanding of the presence of God in your life?
   c. To what extent does collective social or philanthropic engagement with members of your sorority compel you to live out your faith?

Subsidiary question: How has active engagement in your sorority deepened your relationship to God?
   a. How have your lived experiences among Christian sorority sisters enhanced your relationship with God?
   b. In what way has corporate worship with Christian members of your sorority enriched your understanding of the presence of God in your life?
   c. To what extent has corporate engagement with social justice initiatives broadened the way you live out your faith?

``RQ3: How do the activities or initiatives of the sorority that these members engage in with other Christians contribute to the spiritual formation of a Christian sorority sister?

Subsidiary question: How has your active engagement in your sorority positively influenced another Christian sorority member's spiritual growth?

    a. How has your corporate practice of the spiritual disciplines with members of your sorority impacted another sorority member's relationship with God?

    b. In what way does your engagement in corporate church services with members of your sorority influence another Christian sorority member's awareness of the presence of God?

    c. To what extent does collective social or philanthropic engagement with members of your sorority compel another Christian sorority member to live out her faith?

Subsidiary question: How has your active engagement in your sorority been shared with other Christians outside of the sorority?

    a. How has your corporate practice of the spiritual disciplines with members of your sorority impacted another believer outside the sorority?

    b. In what way does your engagement in corporate church services with members of your sorority influence another Christian outside the sorority?

    c. To what extent does collective social or philanthropic engagement with members of your sorority compel another Christ follower outside the sorority?

RQ4: How has engagement in community service and social justice with other Christian sorority members influenced your spiritual growth?

Subsidiary question: How has active participation in community service activities with other Christian sorority members influenced your Christian spiritual formation?

    a. How often do you engage in community outreach with Christian members of your sorority?

    b. How has corporate engagement in community service enriched your relationship with God and others?

    c. In what way has your community engagement shaped how you live out your Christian faith?

Subsidiary question: How has active participation in social justice projects with other Christian sorority members influenced your Christian spiritual formation?

    a. How often do you engage in social justice projects with Christian members of your sorority?

    b. How has corporate engagement in social justice projects enriched your relationship with God and others?

    c. In what way has your service to others through social justice initiatives shaped how you live out your Christian faith?

Appendix E
IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

May 16, 2022

Lorraine Aragon
Mary Lowe

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY21-22-834 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF HOW
ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT IN BLACK GREEK LETTER SORORITIES INFLUENCES
CHRISTIAN MEMBERS' SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Dear Lorraine Aragon, Mary Lowe,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in
accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug
Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review.
This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your
approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in
which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive,
diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of
public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is
met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the
human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects,
and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found
under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse
IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your
research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents
of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any
modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of
continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification

submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix F

Original Transcription Review Email

Good morning ███████,

      I pray this email finds you well. It was a pleasure to interview you. This is a copy of the transcribed interview attached for your review. If there is any discrepancy or correction needed, please let me know and I will adjust the transcript. Also, I welcome referrals if there are others you think might wish to participate in the study. I welcome their participation.

Blessings,
Lorraine Aragon M.Ed.

Appendix G

Member Checking Email

Good afternoon, Ladies,

First, my deepest thanks for your participation! This review is the final leg of the journey. Please review the attached document. You may email back informally. I pray for your continued blessings and health.

May you experience God's richest blessings,
Lorraine Aragon M.Ed.

Attached Document with Instructions

Ladies,

I pray this email finds you well. Below I have included the framework of the

interview protocol. These are the questions that we covered during our interview. In red

italics are some of the general findings in response to these questions. Each interview

may have varied based on the answers. There was a large volume of data. I endeavored to

keep this brief. Please review, and I would like your feedback on:

(1) If you believe the questions were straightforward or if you understand the questions asked?
(2) Secondly, after reviewing these findings, do you feel they accurately reflect what you

wished to state concerning the questions?

Sample Excerpt from email

Interview ▉	47-year-old Black Female
Member of SGR for 27 years	Interview length: 52 minutes
1. Interviewer- Well, I just wanted to say thank you	2. ▉ - OK, all right, perfect.

so much for number one responding. I'm very excited that this is not only my doctoral research study is also my passion for having the voices of Black women heard in research. So, thank you exponentially for that. I will be following an interview protocol, so it will seem like there are a lot of granular details, but there is a reasoning behind it. Still, I do want you to feel free to elaborate as much as you would like to add anything in terms of narrative or anything else; that is especially desired. Okay?	
3. Interviewer- So, of course, the study is about spiritual growth, so my first question is how often have you actively engaged with Christian members of your sorority? By active engagement, I mean joining in prayer, fasting, meditating, or even attending services together.	4. ▮ - It's actually, pretty often because one of my close sorority sisters serves as the chaplain for our region, but she is also my friend outside of the organization because I am the reason, she became a member. I introduced the sorority to her. She and I also go to church together, so there's another piece. In addition to that, before we and not secret or anything like that because this is public information. We always start our meeting in prayer. No matter where we are, we always go to a higher source to convene over the meeting so that we are in decency and order. Above all, being sorority sisters, we are also children of God, so we pray before we do anything. *100% of participants reported at least monthly engagement with the majority stating they engaged bi-weekly in with Sorors in a spiritual discipline.*
5. Interviewer- How often would you say you participate in social or philanthropic activities with the members of your sorority?	6. ▮ - Give or Take How often fluctuates depending upon the time of year. In the summer, we are off because some months are busier than others. Of course, they're not as active during the summertime, so you can have a break with family and vacation and do those kinds of things. So specifically, for 10 months of the year, it's a minimum of once a month but mostly two to three weekends per month. *All participants described deep dedication to social and philanthropic engagement.*

7. Interviewer- What type of philanthropic activities are you engaged in, and what are some of your sororities' target action areas?	8. ▮ - Again it would depend on the season. I know specifically for the role that I am currently in. So, towards the end of the year, the first of the new calendar year, I always host Georgia day at the Capitol. So, we make sure that we're civically engaged in our community. Whatever the issues plaguing our community so whatever issues there are in specific cities and states, that we haven't touched on those topics that we have a day at the Capitol so therefore our voices heard whether that be African Americans or whether that meet women and because we fit in both categories depending on you know the ladies who attend because it is open to the public and we are made sure that I hope that every year other than that it's usually community service and that's also community based so depend upon what our community needs and that particular time those are the community service projects that we engaged in on a regional or national level there are other programs that the sorority kind of mandates that we participate in so some of our corporate sponsors and partnerships would be like our swim 1922 initiative where we have swim clinics to teach children specifically because African Americans have a high rate of death by swimming even though swimming is fun and your supposed to have a great time our initiative makes sure that children are educated on water safety. So usually, that'll be somewhere in early Spring throughout the summer. For some other events that we host, we partner with the March of Dimes, St. Jude, and other activities or just depend on the time of year because they're usually based on those corporate sponsors in the time frame, they mandate that we do such things. So, we are doing things locally, regionally, and nationally throughout the year.

Appendix H
Contact Log

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Week One
Awaiting IRB approval
==
Week Two
Direct Emails

████████████████ Coordinator for Pan Hellenic Council
████ - Rho Zeta Omega Graduate Chapter of AKA

Social Media Posts
Private Groups ˙

BLOG Educators
BGLO Chat
Divine Nine
Sweet Alpha Pi
Black Greek Fraternities and Sororities
Black Greeks
Ivy Vine Metro Atlanta

Referrals
███ Pigford
Patrice
██ Johnson
██ Cotton
Shawntelle
███ Fredericks
Dr. ███ Fields
██ <mark>Malikah (disappeared after several emails)</mark>
Catching
███ Crump
█ Lewis
██ Sellers
Gauthier
█ Weathers
██ Edeogho
Nelson
Dority

Direct Emails
Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority South Atlantic Regional Director
Delta Sigma Theta Marietta-Roswell Chapter
Rev. Dr. ███████ Jimenez-Regional Chaplain DST

-

Sigma Gamma Rho Area Coordinators:
███████ Moore- Alabama
██ Gordon- Georgia
Dr. ███ Perkins -Florida
████ Powell- Tennessee
Dr ████ Lindsey-Tate Mississippi
Dr ████ Fleming -South Carolina

██████████- Zeta Phi Beta Sorority-Southern Regional Director
██████████- Zeta Phi Beta Sorority- Southeastern Regional Director

Referrals
███ Tomlinson
███ <mark>Ishmael (did not meet study criteria), AKA</mark>
███ Brown
███ Davis

Took a day to change soliciting focus toward some local ministries

Social Networking calls for outreach to the Zeta Phi Beta and Delta Sigma Theta members.

===
Week Three
Referral
██ <mark>Mackie (x) AKA</mark>
██ <mark>Timmons (x) AKA</mark>
██ <mark>Lyons (x) ZOB</mark>

African Methodist Episcopal Southern Council requests permission to solicit participants
Rev. ████████ Allen AME in Woodstock
St Paul AME
Turner Chapel

Contacted Mikayla, former student and new member of SGR, for referrals
Contacted Courtney, former student and a new member of AKA, for referrals
Reached out to CAU Alumnae for DST contacts

██ <mark>Gordon (x) SGR</mark>

Requested referrals from interviewees

███████ Gwinn, DST, former roommate at CAU

███ <mark>Jones (x) SGR</mark>

- I have five interviews, three scheduled and two pending

██████████████ *<mark>Ellerbe (x) DST</mark> canceled due to illness.*

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Week Four
This week was following up on earlier contacts
- ███████ Lyons- had a wedding coming up and will follow up with me again.
- ██████████ Ellerbe – my only Delta, unfortunately, has disappeared; I am reaching out once more to see if I could reconnect. She is ill and will not be able to participate.
CAU Religious Life Center
This was a short week due to the holiday.
==
Week Five
Referrals
███████ <mark>Jackson (x) AKA</mark>
Green, AKA(did not show up for the interview)
████ <mark>Scruggs SGR (x) SGR</mark>
███ Watkins SGR (She did not return the consent form- the interview was canceled)
==
Week Six
████████ <mark>Smith (x) AKA</mark>

Second Round of Interviews

████████ <mark>Reed (x), AKA</mark>
████ <mark>Green (x) AKA-</mark> sent consent forms out by US mail, this slowed the process, and then the transcripts were also sent US mail for review and were not received back until Oct. 27th. So the interview data will be added to Chapter 4 and adjustments made; this is my last interview.