

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

VOCATIONAL HOMEPLACE: A CRITICAL WOMANIST SENSORY
AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF BLACK CLERGYWOMEN IN CHAPLAINCY

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how chaplaincy in higher education functions as a homeplace for Black clergywomen who have experienced marginalization, exclusion, and otherization within the Black Church. While the Black Church has historically served as a site of refuge, resistance, and communal formation, it has also often limited the vocational flourishing of Black women called to ministry through gendered expectations, patriarchal structures, and constrained pathways to leadership. As a result, many Black clergywomen find themselves negotiating a tension between deep ecclesial commitment and persistent institutional exclusion. This study explores how chaplaincy offers an alternative vocational context in which Black clergywomen can more fully embody their ministerial identities and leadership gifts.

Drawing on bell hooks's concept of homeplace as a site of affirmation, healing, resistance, and self-definition, this dissertation develops the concept of vocational homeplace to describe the ways chaplaincy creates spaces where Black clergywomen can thrive professionally, spiritually, and personally. Employing a Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnographic methodology, the study centers embodied experience, memory, place, emotion, and spiritual knowing as legitimate sources of knowledge. Through critical reflection on the author's vocational journey and experiences in higher education chaplaincy, the dissertation examines how chaplaincy functions as a liberatory space that resists the exclusionary dynamics often encountered in congregational settings.

The project further engages womanist thought, Black feminist theory, and sociological understandings of institutional adaptation to analyze why chaplaincy has become an increasingly significant vocational pathway for Black clergywomen. Rather than framing chaplaincy merely as an alternative ministry setting, this dissertation argues that it can serve as a vocational

homeplace—a context in which Black clergywomen find belonging, agency, authenticity, and opportunities for leadership that may be unavailable within traditional ecclesial structures.

Ultimately, this study contributes to scholarship on chaplaincy, womanist theology, vocational formation, and Black religious life by offering a new framework for understanding the migration of Black clergywomen into chaplaincy and the transformative possibilities that emerge when ministry is practiced in spaces capable of sustaining their full humanity. Through the concept of vocational homeplace, the dissertation illuminates how chaplaincy can function not only as a site of professional employment but also as a place of restoration, resistance, and flourishing.

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spaces that make such flourishing possible. May this work honor those who helped bring it into being.

Introduction: A Story of Exclusion and Affirmation

Rev. Simone had spent years faithfully serving at a large Black Baptist church—preaching, leading outreach, and pastoring women and children. Despite her gifts and experience, she was repeatedly passed over for ordination and senior leadership roles, told she “wasn’t ready” while younger, less experienced men advanced. After one particularly painful rejection for the senior pastorate, she left. Years later, now a chaplain at a major university, I asked her how it felt to be in a new ministerial setting. She said simply, “This is the first time I’ve done ministry without having to fight for my legitimacy.”

In this role, Simone ministers across boundaries—students, faculty, staff, alumni—freely integrating her theological voice, pastoral gifts, and justice commitments. She no longer needs permission to lead. Her shift from church ministry to higher education chaplaincy reveals the core claim of this dissertation: that the systemic exclusion Black clergywomen face in the Black Church has become a catalyst for vocational innovation. In spaces like Simone’s, chaplaincy becomes not only a refuge from gatekeeping, but a site of institutional transformation and theological freedom.

While much scholarship, including Jacquelyn Grant’s *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus*, has exposed how the Black Church marginalizes Black women’s leadership, more recent studies confirm that these barriers remain deeply entrenched.¹ Smarr et al. highlight how Black clergywomen continue to face intersecting racial and gender discrimination that restricts their ministerial authority.² McCluney’s phenomenological study of Black clergywomen examines how they navigate marginality in predominantly male ministerial

¹ Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 204.

² Kimberly Nelms Smarr, Rachelle Disbennett-Lee, and Amy Cooper Hakim, “Gender and Race in Ministry Leadership: Experiences of Black Clergywomen,” *Religions* 9, no. 12 (2018): 377.

contexts and how those experiences shape their leadership practices.³ **McCluney’s phenomenological study of Black clergywomen examines how they navigate marginality in predominantly male ministerial contexts and how those experiences shape their leadership practices.**⁴ Schleifer and Miller examine the stained-glass ceiling, showing that even in churches with progressive rhetoric, patriarchal structures persist.⁵ Patricia Hill Collins argues that Black women’s marginalization in ecclesial leadership mirrors larger systemic inequities, reinforcing how race, gender, and class operate together to maintain exclusion.⁶

Smarr et al. and Kelly Brown Douglas also draw attention to the persistence of misogynoir within religious spaces and institutions, noting that Black clergywomen are often forced to perform in ways that limit theological freedom and pastoral authority.⁷ These findings are echoed by Weems,⁸ who critiques how male-centered biblical interpretations perpetuate exclusion, and by Melissa Harris-Perry,⁹ whose “crooked room” metaphor captures the cultural distortions that challenge Black women’s legitimacy in public and religious life.

This dissertation goes beyond identifying these exclusions to present higher education chaplaincy as a viable, affirming, and liberating alternative. Unlike traditional ecclesiastical settings that often impose rigid hierarchies and gendered theological limitations, higher education chaplaincy fosters “real spaces,” or environments where Black clergywomen can

³ Courtney L. McCluney, *Blooming Where I’m Planted: A Phenomenological Investigation of Black Clergywomen’s Marginality and Leadership* (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2017).

⁴ Stephanie M. Crumpton, *A Womanist Pastoral Theology Against Intimate and Cultural Violence* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1.

⁵ Cyrus Schleifer and Amy D. Miller, “Occupational Gender Inequality among American Clergy, 1976–2016: Revisiting the Stained-Glass Ceiling,” *Sociology of Religion* 78, no. 4 (2017): 388.

⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 35.

⁷ Smarr, Disbennett-Lee, and Hakim, “Gender and Race in Ministry Leadership,” 377.

⁸ Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away: Understanding the Timeless Connection Between Women of Today and Women in the Bible* (New York: Walk Worthly Press, 2005), 56.

⁹ Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 29.

authentically embody their ministerial gifts. Cadge highlights chaplaincy’s emphasis on relational care and advocacy, which stands in stark contrast to dogmatic constraints within churches.¹⁰ **Miller-McLemore argues that chaplaincy allows clergywomen to integrate pastoral care with social justice commitments, opening new models of liberative ministry.**¹¹ Research by Sullivan demonstrates that chaplaincy allows clergywomen to engage in public theology, interfaith collaboration, and trauma-informed care—all while resisting theological silencing.¹² Research on Black clergywomen finds that greater support and affirmation contribute to vocational flourishing, suggesting that ministry contexts that provide such conditions can enable them to reimagine ministry as spiritually and vocationally sustainable.¹³ This aligns with Yolanda Pierce’s work on liberatory ministry, **which models pastoral presence as mobile, responsive, and justice-driven.**¹⁴

In this regard, chaplaincy is not merely an escape from ecclesiastical harm; it is a redefinition of ministry itself—rooted in relational care, theological plurality, and embodied justice. Higher education chaplaincy provides Black clergywomen with a vocational and personal home-place where they are not merely tolerated but empowered to lead, heal, and minister in ways that honor their spiritual callings. As bell hooks asserts, the home-place is “a site of resistance and liberation struggle,”¹⁵ and chaplaincy—particularly in higher education—

¹⁰ Wendy Cadge, *Spiritual Care: The Everyday Work of Chaplains* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 8.

¹¹ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “The Human Web: Reflections on the State of Pastoral Theology,” *Christian Century* 110, no. 10 (1993): 368.

¹² Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *A Ministry of Presence: Chaplaincy, Spiritual Care, and the Law* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 53.

¹³ Kimberly Nelms Smarr, Rachelle Disbennett-Lee, and Amy Cooper Hakim, “Gender and Race in Ministry Leadership: Experiences of Black Clergywomen,” *Religions* 9, no. 12 (2018): 377.

¹⁴ Yolanda Pierce, *In My Grandmother’s House: Black Women, Faith, and the Stories We Inherit* (New York: Broadleaf Books, 2021), 83.

¹⁵ bell hooks, “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance,” in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 42.

functions as just such a site. The “real spaces” created through higher education chaplaincy offer a vocational sanctuary where Black clergywomen, long marginalized by the Black Church, can thrive.

Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

Despite decades of dedicated service, theological training, and spiritual leadership, Black clergywomen remain systematically excluded from full participation in many traditional ecclesiastical contexts. Within the Black Church—often regarded as a sanctuary for Black communities—deeply rooted patriarchal structures continue to marginalize Black women’s ministerial authority. Jacquelyn Grant has long critiqued this dissonance, stating that “the Black church is a paradox: both a source of empowerment and oppression for Black women.”¹⁶ This contradiction—between the Church’s liberatory public mission and its internal resistance to women’s leadership—highlights a critical and unresolved problem.

While foundational Womanist scholars such as Jacquelyn Grant, Katie Geneva Cannon, and Delores S. Williams laid the critical groundwork for interrogating the dual oppressions of racism and sexism within Christian theology, their work also opened space for reimagining Black women’s religious leadership. Grant’s *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus* made visible the theological erasure of Black women, arguing that both white feminist theology and traditional Black Church theology failed to affirm Black women’s full humanity and spiritual authority.¹⁷ Katie Cannon’s pioneering work in Womanist Ethics insisted that moral wisdom is found in the daily, embodied experiences of Black women, not abstract theological

¹⁶ Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 199.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

formulations.¹⁸ Delores Williams, in her critique of atonement theology, called for an ethical and theological framework rooted in survival, resistance, and the sacredness of Black women's lives.¹⁹

Building upon this intellectual foundation, second- and third-wave Womanist scholars such as Eboni Marshall Turman, Melanie C. Jones, Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Monica A. Coleman, and Angela D. Sims have continued to interrogate the ecclesial, cultural, and institutional constraints placed on Black clergywomen. Turman, in *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation*, deconstructs the sacralized nature of patriarchy within Black Church spaces and challenges the theological assumptions that normalize gender hierarchy.²⁰ Jones's concept of "embodied ethics" links theological reflection to Black women's sensual, spiritual, and intellectual selfhood, insisting that liberation must occur not only theologically but vocationally and somatically.²¹ Similarly, Floyd-Thomas has argued that Womanist theology must be a catalyst for social transformation, critiquing the structural power imbalances that shape religious life and calling for shared power as a moral imperative.²²

However, much of this important scholarship remains anchored in the site of the Black Church as both the locus of oppression and the imagined site of potential transformation. The dominant framing has focused on reforming or reclaiming space within Black ecclesial structures rather than critically examining what it means for Black clergywomen to walk away from those

¹⁸ Katie G. Cannon, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 40.

¹⁹ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 161.

²⁰ Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 86.

²¹ Melanie C. Jones, "In My Flesh: Millennial Womanist Ethics and the Moral Wisdom of Black Women's Bodies," in *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, ed. M. Shawn Copeland (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 103.

²² Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 22.

spaces altogether. **Black clergywomen are often forced into a kind of vocational double consciousness, caught between the expectation to remain loyal to Black Church traditions and the internal drive to pursue ministries that honor their full identities.**²³

What remains underexplored in the current literature is what vocational innovation looks like when Black clergywomen choose not to remain and resist within the Church but to forge new paths altogether. What happens when survival is no longer the goal—when flourishing becomes the theological imperative? This dissertation intervenes at precisely that juncture. It asks what vocational alternatives—particularly higher education chaplaincy—can offer in terms of theological freedom, spiritual affirmation, and institutional authority. Rather than merely critiquing exclusion or reimagining the site of their oppression, this project explores how Black clergywomen actively construct liberatory spaces that affirm their callings, embody Womanist theological principles, and resist the reproduction of ecclesial harm.

This study moves the discourse beyond the question of access to traditional pulpits and into a broader consideration of vocational home-places. By attending to chaplaincy as both a practice and a site of theological meaning-making, it demonstrates that Black clergywomen are not merely seeking inclusion within inherited models of ministry—they are reimagining ministry itself.

This dissertation argues that higher education chaplaincy offers a distinct vocational alternative—a liberatory home-place where Black clergywomen are empowered to minister authentically, integrate Womanist theology and social justice frameworks, and create “real spaces” of care, affirmation, and community transformation. Unlike other forms of ministry,

²³ Courtney L. McCluney, *Blooming Where I’m Planted: A Phenomenological Investigation of Black Clergywomen’s Marginality and Leadership* (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2017), 1.

higher education chaplaincy invites clergy to serve a broad and intergenerational constituency—including students, faculty, staff, administrators, alumni, and families—while also functioning as public theologians within pluralistic institutions.

As Melanie C. Jones asserts, Womanist ministry centers care, community, and activism in ways often sidelined within patriarchal ecclesial systems.²⁴ Building on this, Wendy Cadge observes that chaplains in educational settings operate at the intersection of pastoral care, interfaith leadership, and institutional critique, often shaping inclusive spaces beyond the reach of doctrinal gatekeeping.²⁵ As Winnifred Fallers Sullivan explains, chaplaincy represents a ministry of presence, bridging sacred and secular domains to offer care that is relational and embodied.²⁶

In this way, higher education chaplaincy is not merely a vocational alternative to traditional ministry but a transformative model of theological innovation—one that enables Black clergywomen to resist exclusion, affirm their callings, and reimagine ministry in ways that are intellectually rigorous, spiritually grounded, and institutionally impactful. Unlike congregational ministry, which is often constrained by denominational doctrine and patriarchal hierarchies, and unlike hospital or military chaplaincy, which is shaped by clinical models or chain-of-command structures, higher education chaplaincy offers a uniquely expansive landscape for vocational wholeness. Here, ministry is interdisciplinary and multivalent, spanning spiritual care, public theology, institutional leadership, interfaith engagement, and moral formation. In ministering to students, faculty, staff, administrators, alumni, and parents, the higher education

²⁴ Melanie C. Jones and Liz S. Alexander, “#MillennialWomanism,” *Black Theology* 16, no. 3 (2018): 268.

²⁵ Wendy Cadge, *Spiritual Care: The Everyday Work of Chaplains* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 96.

²⁶ Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *A Ministry of Presence: Chaplaincy, Spiritual Care, and the Law* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 173.

chaplain becomes not only a pastoral presence, but a cultural theologian, an educator, and a justice-oriented advocate embedded in the intellectual and ethical life of the university. This vocation, grounded in liberationist theology and care ethics, enables Black clergywomen to do ministry that is both contextually agile and theologically grounded ministry that is not confined to pulpit or ward but shaped by presence, pedagogy, and prophetic witness across the lifespan and the institution.

Given this persistent exclusion and emerging innovation, this study asks:

1. How does higher education chaplaincy function as a vocational home-place that affirms the theological authority, leadership, and wholeness of Black clergywomen?
2. In what ways does the creation of “real spaces” within higher education chaplaincy address the limitations of the Black Church and expand the possibilities for liberatory, justice-centered ministry?
3. How do Black clergywomen navigate, resist, and transform racial, gendered, and institutional biases within higher education chaplaincy while building ministries rooted in care, affirmation, and theological innovation?

Theoretical Framework

Womanist theology forms the foundational theological and ethical lens for this dissertation. Developed initially to affirm the sacred worth and unique epistemologies of Black women, Womanist theology centers the moral wisdom born from their lived experiences and insists that theology must begin with their stories. While early Womanist theologians such as Jacquelyn Grant, Katie G. Cannon, and Delores Williams laid the groundwork for centering Black women in theological discourse, this project intentionally engages a broader scope of

Womanist thinkers whose work advances the conversation toward questions of vocation, liberation, and institutional innovation.

Womanist theology is used in this study not simply as a critique of exclusion but as a method for constructing alternative spaces for Black clergywomen to thrive. Renita J. Weems emphasizes the theological authority of Black women's lived realities, arguing that Black women bring their questions, brokenness, fears, and needs to the biblical text and require it to respond to their lived experience.²⁷ Weems's interpretive model supports this dissertation's emphasis on how Black clergywomen bring their full selves to ministry in chaplaincy, reshaping both scripture and institution through their embodied experiences.

Kelly Brown Douglas expands the Womanist theological vision by emphasizing the connection between Black women's spiritual expression and sociopolitical resistance. In *Stand Your Ground*, Douglas argues that theological frameworks that fail to affirm the dignity and freedom of Black lives distort the justice of God.²⁸ This bold claim highlights a major theme of this project: that ministry, to be truly liberative, must affirm the full humanity and agency of those who lead it. Higher education chaplaincy, as explored in this dissertation, provides such affirmation where traditional church structures have failed.

In *Introducing Womanist Theology*, Stephanie Y. Mitchem draws attention to how Womanist theology resists binary thinking and rigid categories, emphasizing that Black women do not separate spirituality from lived reality but understand spirituality as embedded in the mundane, the political, and the embodied.²⁹ Mitchem's emphasis on integrated spirituality

²⁷ Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego, CA: LuraMedia, 1988), 25.

²⁸ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 113.

²⁹ Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 34.

reinforces the significance of chaplaincy spaces that allow Black clergywomen to lead holistically, bringing their spirituality, intellect, emotion, and politics into one vocational space.

Moreover, theologians such as Nyasha Junior and Toni Bond have challenged theological norms by broadening Womanist theology to include reproductive justice and biblical interpretation. Junior argues that Womanist biblical interpretation is part of a distinctive tradition of African American women's engagement with biblical texts.³⁰ This interpretive shift aligns with Black clergywomen redefining vocational meaning beyond traditional pulpits, emphasizing their interpretations of call and leadership in chaplaincy settings.

Toni Bond, a theologian and co-founder of the reproductive justice movement, links faith and Womanist ethics to the dismantling of systems that constrain Black women's bodily autonomy and reproductive freedom.³¹ Her work supports the argument that ministry cannot be confined to the pulpit—it must be expansive, embodied, and committed to liberating spaces. Higher education chaplaincy, as argued here, allows for such liberative practice and theological innovation.

Through these thinkers and insights, this dissertation uses Womanist theology as both a diagnostic tool to name harm and an imaginative framework to construct a vocational alternative. Womanist theology is not just referenced but incorporated into the research design, narrative interpretations, and theological commitments of this work.

This project engages Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a core methodological and analytical lens to interrogate the racialized and gendered structures embedded in both ecclesial and

³⁰ Nyasha Junior, *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 1.

³¹ Toni M. Bond, "Faithful Voices: Creating a Womanist Theo-Ethic of Reproductive Justice" (PhD diss., Claremont School of Theology, 2020), 30.

academic institutions. CRT, developed initially by legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia Williams, provides a powerful toolkit for understanding how structural racism functions not as an anomaly but as a normalized, systemic force in American institutions, including religious and educational ones.

At its core, CRT holds that racism is deeply entrenched in the fabric of American life. Derrick Bell famously argued that “racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society,” challenging liberal assumptions that progress is linear and inevitable.³² In ecclesial contexts, this insight invites a critical analysis of how the Black Church—despite its role in racial uplift—can replicate exclusionary and patriarchal patterns that marginalize Black clergywomen. CRT does not accept reformist narratives at face value but asks what voices and bodies are continually left out of institutional change.

A key contribution of CRT is Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality, which underscores how multiple systems of oppression—racism, sexism, classism—interact to produce unique experiences of marginalization. Crenshaw insists, “Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects.”³³ This framework is central to understanding how Black clergywomen simultaneously navigate both racial and gender bias in their ecclesial and academic contexts. It highlights why the challenges they face cannot be fully understood through either race or gender alone, but through their dynamic interaction.

³² Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), ix.

³³ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later,” interview by Columbia Law School, June 8, 2017.

Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic’s emphasis on counter-storytelling is also vital to this project. They argue that stories can name forms of discrimination obscured by dominant narratives and thereby make them easier to recognize and challenge.³⁴ This insight reinforces the use of narrative in this study, particularly the importance of centering the stories of Black clergywomen whose lived experiences challenge dominant theological and institutional assumptions. Through storytelling and testimony, they assert agency and theological authority in spaces that have historically dismissed or ignored their voices.

Mari Matsuda adds to this methodology with her directive to “look to the bottom,” urging scholars and practitioners to privilege the perspectives of those most affected by injustice. In religious institutions, this means elevating the epistemological and spiritual insights of Black clergywomen who often operate from the margins.³⁵ Patricia Williams further illustrates how systemic exclusion is embedded even in ostensibly neutral systems like the law—and, by extension, theology—by demonstrating how legal discourse can construct and preserve privilege while shaping whose voices are recognized and heard.³⁶ This dissertation adapts that lens to include ecclesial policies, ordination structures, and vocational assumptions that limit the full inclusion of Black women in ministry.

In the context of this project, CRT helps diagnose the deeper cultural and structural barriers that give rise to phenomena such as the “stained-glass ceiling”—a term that encapsulates the invisible yet powerful forces that prevent Black clergywomen from ascending to senior leadership roles in the Black Church.³⁷ By deploying CRT alongside Womanist theology, this

³⁴ Richard Delgado, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (New York: NYU Press, 2017), 44.

³⁵ Mari Matsuda, “Looking to the Bottom: Critical Legal Studies and Reparations,” *Harvard Civil Rights–Civil Liberties Law Review* 22 (1987): 324.

³⁶ Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 92.

³⁷ Ronald Schleifer and Steven J. Miller, *The Stained Glass Ceiling: Churches and Their Struggle for Gender Equality* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 97.

dissertation moves beyond personal narratives of struggle to a broader analysis of institutional design, power, and resistance.

bell hooks' concept of the home-place functions as a central interpretive lens in this dissertation. First articulated in her essay "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance," hooks describes the home-place as a location "where Black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination."³⁸ Defined as a site of resistance and restoration, the home-place affirms Black women's humanity while enabling acts of quiet but powerful defiance against systems of oppression.³⁹ In this study, chaplaincy in higher education is examined as a contemporary home-place: a space where Black clergywomen can practice ministry that is both spiritually rooted and structurally transformative.

hooks emphasized that historically, "despite the brutal dehumanization of slavery, of racial apartheid, of economic exploitation and oppression, Black women have resisted by making homes where all Black people could strive to be subjects, not objects."⁴⁰ These domestic and often informal spaces—kitchens, living rooms, front porches—were incubators of healing, love, and resistance. In the same way, chaplaincy, particularly in higher education settings, offers Black clergywomen the opportunity to create "real spaces," or environments that affirm dignity and resist exclusion, not through formal authority alone but through the cultivation of presence, care, and embodied leadership.

hooks considers that to be in resistance, one must first be well.⁴¹ This assertion reframes resistance not merely as confrontation but as restoration. The home-place enables healing from

³⁸ bell hooks, "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance," in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 42.

³⁹ Ibid., 42.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 42.

⁴¹ Ibid., 42.

the psychic wounds of systemic violence and marginalization. For Black clergywomen in chaplaincy, wellness is not only personal—it is theological and vocational. Their ability to offer care, leadership, and spiritual presence in institutional settings hinges upon their ability to minister from spaces that affirm their wholeness. In hooks’ terms, chaplaincy becomes a location of possibility within oppressive structures, an opening in which new ways of being and relating are made viable.⁴²

Crucially, hooks reminds us that these spaces are not merely personal refuges but sites of political resistance. “Making homeplace was about the construction of a safe place where Black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination.”⁴³ In this way, higher education chaplaincy as a home-place is not limited to individual wellness; it fosters collective transformation. The chaplain not only tends to others’ needs but also disrupts institutional norms by modeling liberatory care. hooks emphasizes that the home-place has historically been sustained by Black women and that it must “nurture both individual and collective empowerment.”⁴⁴ This dissertation, therefore, frames higher education chaplaincy as a mutually generative space: one where Black clergywomen experience affirmation and healing while simultaneously fostering the healing and liberation of those they serve.

As this project contends, chaplaincy is not merely an escape from ecclesiastical exclusion—it is an intentional vocation to reimagine ministry itself. In hooks’ terms, it is a refusal to allow white supremacist capitalist patriarchy to determine the nature and direction of their lives.⁴⁵ Through their work in chaplaincy, Black clergywomen create real spaces—home-

⁴² Ibid., 43.

⁴³ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 42.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 47.

places—where they are not merely included but are indispensable, not merely surviving but thriving, and where their leadership becomes the very ground of institutional change.

Finally, this study incorporates Robert K. Merton's Social Strain Theory to describe how Black clergywomen adapt to institutional barriers that restrict their ministerial flourishing. Merton's theory, developed in the mid-20th century, posits that social strain arises when there is a disjunction between culturally valued goals and the structurally available means to achieve them. In his foundational essay "Social Structure and Anomie," Merton identified five modes of individual adaptation to this strain: conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion.⁴⁶ Of these, innovation is the most salient for this dissertation. He explained that innovation involves the acceptance of the cultural goals but the rejection of the traditional or institutionalized means of attaining them.⁴⁷ In this context, Black clergywomen do not abandon the goal of ministry, service, or leadership—they abandon the limited and exclusionary structures that prevent them from fulfilling that goal within traditional ecclesial spaces.

Merton described strain as emerging from blocked opportunity structures, especially in stratified societies where access to legitimate means is differentially distributed.⁴⁸ Within many Black churches, these blocked structures manifest through patriarchal theology, gendered power hierarchies, and cultural norms that deny women the opportunity to serve in senior leadership roles. For clergywomen who are theologically trained, spiritually called, and pastorally gifted, the inability to live out their calling through traditional church roles can create a profound vocational tension. Merton's framework allows us to understand their movement into chaplaincy

⁴⁶ Robert K. Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," in *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: Free Press, 1968), 194

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 195.

not as a resignation from ministry, but as a positive and creative deviation from dominant ecclesial norms.

This theory is particularly powerful because it reframes adaptation as agency. Merton argues that the same cultural goals may generate a range of behavioral responses depending on the availability—or denial—of institutional means.⁴⁹ In this dissertation, higher education chaplaincy is analyzed as a vocational innovation: an alternative institutional space that allows Black clergywomen to realize their ministerial goals on their own terms. By creating pastoral spaces centered on care, justice, and authenticity, they subvert the very norms that once excluded them. As Merton’s analysis suggests, pressure toward uniformity under a given cultural code can generate the selective emergence of deviant responses, suggesting that resistance is not only expected but perhaps even necessary for structural change.⁵⁰

Higher education chaplaincy, then, represents not a secondary path but a deliberate and radical reimagining of spiritual leadership. Through this reimagining, Black clergywomen redefine ministry, not as subordination to ecclesial gatekeeping but as the generative creation of “real spaces” rooted in relational leadership, vocational autonomy, and spiritual integrity.

In short, Social Strain Theory helps this dissertation frame higher education chaplaincy as a site of innovation, not concession. Black clergywomen, encountering structural barriers in the Black Church, do not abandon their vocations—they innovate. In doing so, they disrupt normative assumptions about where and how ministry must occur, and they construct liberatory models of leadership that expand the very meaning of church, care, and community.

By engaging these four frameworks and bringing them into critical dialogue, this dissertation constructs a multi-layered analytical lens for examining both the exclusion and the

⁴⁹ Ibid., 199.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 200.

liberatory ingenuity of Black clergywomen. Womanist theology, Critical Race Theory (CRT), bell hooks' home-place theory, and Robert K. Merton's Social Strain Theory work in tandem to uncover how systemic inequities operate in ecclesial and academic spaces, while also illuminating how Black clergywomen respond not only with resistance, but with innovation, imagination, and deeply rooted care. These frameworks reveal the complexity of vocational decision-making and the intentional creation of "real spaces" within higher education chaplaincy that enable healing, advocacy, and ministry to flourish in contexts that affirm rather than constrain.

Crucially, these theoretical tools do more than frame the lived experiences of Black clergywomen—they also shape this dissertation's interpretation of the existing body of scholarship in the following ways:

Womanist theology provides the ethical and spiritual foundation for centering Black women's lived realities as sacred, offering an incisive critique of theological traditions that have historically silenced or ignored them.

Critical Race Theory highlights the institutional nature of racial and gendered exclusion, helping to locate Black clergywomen's marginalization within broader systemic patterns, rather than individual or isolated experiences. As Crenshaw and Delgado emphasize, such exclusion is structural and enduring, demanding sustained and intersectional analysis.

bell hooks' theory of the home-place offers a transformative re-reading of spiritual and institutional spaces—not only as places of refuge from harm, but also as sites of quiet, persistent defiance. The home-place becomes a space where Black women reclaim their humanity and agency through acts of care, self-definition, and resistance.

Finally, Social Strain Theory allows this study to view chaplaincy as more than an alternative career path; it becomes a sociological response to the blocked opportunities and systemic constraints within the Black Church. Merton's concept of innovation provides a vocabulary for understanding the strategic and visionary shifts Black clergywomen make when they forge new paths in higher education chaplaincy, creating ministry models that better align with their ethical commitments and leadership gifts.

Together, these frameworks offer a justice and liberation-oriented architecture for this study; one that refuses to romanticize the Black Church or oversimplify the challenges of higher education chaplaincy. Instead, they invite a complex and hopeful vision: that new ecclesiology can emerge from the margins, built not on hierarchy or exclusion, but on care, wholeness, and liberation. This theoretical foundation enables the dissertation to not only critique existing systems, but to imagine and affirm higher education chaplaincy as a transformative vocational home-place. In this sacred space, Black clergywomen create "real spaces" that enable them to lead with integrity, build with intention, and thrive beyond constraint.

Methodology: Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography

This dissertation employs Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography, a novel methodological framework created for this study that blends autoethnographic narrative, critical race and Womanist theory, and embodied sensory reflection. This approach affirms the lived experience and theological agency of Black clergywomen while resisting dominant academic paradigms that often marginalize nontraditional forms of knowing and storytelling. These dominant paradigms are often Eurocentric, centered on Western, white, male, and heteronormative frameworks that treat their own cultural assumptions as universal standards of

knowledge. It is particularly suited for a study concerned with the interplay between identity, exclusion, ministry, and liberative spiritual leadership.

Autoethnography, as a method, situates the researcher's own story within a broader cultural, social, and political context. Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner define autoethnography as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural."⁵¹ In this project, autoethnography allows for a reflexive and theological examination of the researcher's own vocational journey as a Black clergywoman, including her transition into higher education chaplaincy and the experiences of rejection, affirmation, and reimagining along the way.

This personal narrative is not supplemental—it is central. Womanist theology insists that Black women's lived experiences are valid sources of theological knowledge. As Katie Cannon's work demonstrates, Black women's experiences are a source of moral wisdom.⁵² This project affirms that the autoethnographic voice of the researcher is a site of theological reflection, institutional critique, and liberative praxis.

The "critical" dimension of this method draws from Critical Race Theory (CRT), an interdisciplinary framework that explores how racism is deeply embedded in legal systems, cultural narratives, and institutional structures—not merely the result of individual prejudice, but a systemic force that shapes social outcomes across generations.⁵³ CRT emphasizes the role of systems of power, or organized structures that determine who has access to resources, authority, and legitimacy in society. This study also critically engages racism, defined as a system of

⁵¹ Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 739.

⁵² Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 132.

⁵³ Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (New York: NYU Press, 2017), 3.

advantage based on race that operates through policies, practices, and cultural representations to uphold white supremacy and marginalize people of color.⁵⁴ Alongside racism, it interrogates patriarchy, a social system in which men hold primary power and dominate in roles of political, moral, and religious authority, often upheld through cultural, theological, and institutional norms that subordinate women.⁵⁵

A key analytical tool within CRT is intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how multiple forms of oppression—such as racism, sexism, classism, and heteronormativity—intersect in the lives of marginalized people, creating unique and compounding barriers.⁵⁶ In this project, intersectionality illuminates how racism, patriarchy, and theological gatekeeping interact. Theological gatekeeping refers to institutional control over who is recognized as a legitimate theological voice, often reinforcing patriarchal, Eurocentric, and exclusionary norms in ecclesial and academic contexts. Eurocentrism, in this context, refers to the centering of white, Western theological perspectives as normative while marginalizing the theological insights and leadership of Black women and other non-European communities.

This methodology thus attends not only to systemic critique, analyzing the broader social and religious forces that structure exclusion, but also to institutional analysis, examining how religious and academic organizations sustain these exclusions through policy, culture, and praxis. Through this lens, the method makes space for naming, understanding, and resisting the overlapping systems that restrict Black clergywomen's theological agency and vocational flourishing.

⁵⁴ Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race*, 5th Anniversary ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 7.

⁵⁵ bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Atria Books, 2004), 18.

⁵⁶ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1244.

The “sensory” element refers to the attention this method pays to embodiment, space, memory, and the felt experience of place. This study attends to the emotional, physical, and spiritual resonance of chaplaincy as home-place—what it feels like to belong, to breathe more deeply, to lead with freedom. Following the work of Sara Ahmed and Gloria Anzaldúa, it recognizes how bodies carry knowledge that transcends what is spoken, offering profound insights into how Black clergywomen experience affirmation, alienation, healing, and transformation.⁵⁷ In this way, the method honors bell hooks’ understanding of the home-place as not only a domestic or emotional refuge but also a theological site of resistance and restoration, aligning with Womanist theology’s commitment to spiritual care as a means of liberation.

The method also prioritizes narrative data from other Black clergywomen chaplains, collected through qualitative interviews and story-sharing circles. These narratives are not analyzed through a detached lens but are held in dialogical tension with the researcher’s own experiences. Together, they form a textured portrait of the ways Black clergywomen are navigating, resisting, and transforming institutional spaces. Narratives will be examined thematically and sensorially—with attention to emotion, movement, language, space, and spiritual practice—guided by Womanist principles of relationality, care, and community accountability.

In practice, Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography enables this dissertation to do three things simultaneously:

1. Theologically reflect on the researcher’s own journey as a Black clergywoman navigating exclusion and claiming higher education chaplaincy as a liberatory space.

⁵⁷ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 6.

2. Amplify and analyze the stories of other Black clergywomen who have transitioned into higher education chaplaincy, interpreting their narratives through Womanist, critical, and theological lenses.
3. Construct a liberatory framework for ministry that honors the complexity of Black women's leadership and proposes higher education chaplaincy as a home-place grounded in justice, care, and belonging.

This methodology challenges the idea that research must be emotionally distant or universally objective. Instead, it affirms that knowledge emerges from the lived, embodied, and collective wisdom of Black women. It aims not only to analyze higher education chaplaincy as a viable alternative to exclusion but also to experience it, remember it, reimagine it—and to co-create, through research, new possibilities for what ministry can be.

As illustrated in Figure 1, Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography integrates Womanist Theology, Critical Race Theory, autoethnography, and narrative interviews into a unified methodological framework.

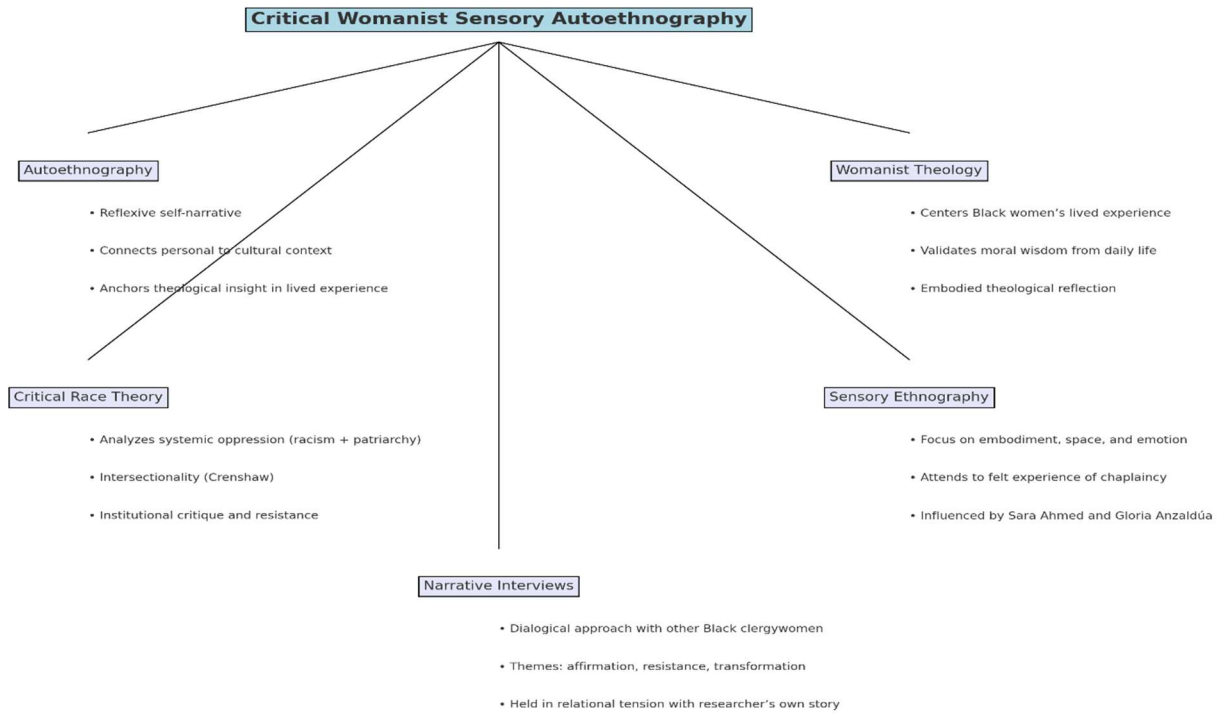


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Literature Review: Black Clergywomen, the Black Church, and Chaplaincy as Vocational Home-Place

This section surveys the intellectual and theological foundations laid by Womanist scholars and recent empirical studies on Black clergywomen's vocational marginalization and creative resistance to contextualize the study's intervention.

Over the past several decades, scholars have rigorously examined the marginalization of Black clergywomen within the Black Church, revealing how patriarchal, theological, and institutional structures collaborate to limit their access to spiritual authority and leadership. Central to this body of work are First Generation Womanist theologians, who provided a critical response to both white feminist theology and traditional Black theology for neglecting the unique religious and ethical experiences of Black women.

Jacquelyn Grant's *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus* was groundbreaking in its insistence that neither white feminist theology nor Black theology adequately affirmed the full humanity, agency, or Christological imagination of Black women. Grant argues that Black women are rendered invisible in both Black theology and feminist theology, calling for a theological framework that centers Black women's subjectivity, leadership, and suffering.⁵⁸

Katie Geneva Cannon deepened this critique by grounding Womanist ethics in the lived, embodied experiences of Black women and presenting ethics as a resource for survival, resistance, and liberation.⁵⁹ In her essay "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness,"

⁵⁸ Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 209.

⁵⁹ Katie Geneva Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 129.

Cannon wrote that Black women had long been engaged in theologizing through daily acts of endurance, care, and moral insight, even as dominant religious structures dismissed these.⁶⁰

Delores S. Williams advanced Womanist theology by radically reimagining the meaning of Christian suffering. In *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Williams critiques traditional atonement theology, particularly its glorification of redemptive suffering, arguing instead that Jesus did not come to die but to show us how to live well in the face of evil.⁶¹ Her concept of the “hermeneutic of survival”⁶² affirms Black women’s endurance as a theological virtue rooted in resistance, not passivity.

Second- and third-wave Womanist scholars such as Eboni Marshall Turman, Melanie C. Jones, Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Monica A. Coleman, Nyasha Junior, and Emilie Townes have continued this work by interrogating the institutional, ecclesial, and vocational implications of Womanist theology. Turman’s *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation* critiques the sacralized violence of the Black Church and insists that transformation must begin with Black women’s embodied realities.⁶³ Floyd-Thomas articulates Womanist ethics as a liberatory project of communal flourishing and resistance, emphasizing the need not only to critique patriarchal structures but also to construct liberatory alternatives.⁶⁴

Monica Coleman integrates Womanist theology with process theology, arguing for theological responsiveness to lived reality, including mental health, trauma, and relational complexity. Her work approaches Womanist theology as beginning with the realities of

⁶⁰ Katie G. Cannon, “The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness,” in *Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 22.

⁶¹ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 161.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶³ Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 3.

⁶⁴ Stacey Floyd-Thomas, “That We May Dare to Suffer: The Moral and Theological Urgency of Flourishing,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24, no. 1 (2008): 147.

embodied lives and lived experience.⁶⁵ Melanie C. Jones advances a millennial Womanism that embraces intersectionality, digital culture, moral imagination, contradiction, complexity, and embodied wholeness.⁶⁶

Nyasha Junior's *Reimagining Hagar* reclaims biblical interpretation as an act of theological agency and self-determination for Black women.⁶⁷ Emilie Townes critiques the cultural production of evil that targets Black women and calls for prophetic ethics rooted in resistance and reconstruction.⁶⁸ Layli Maparyan expands the Womanist horizon by defining it as a justice-seeking spirituality grounded in community care, healing, and liberation.⁶⁹

Several empirical and ethnographic studies further expose how Black clergywomen face theological gatekeeping, tokenization, and pastoral marginalization. Carolyn A. Knight's research illustrates how respectability politics and theological conservatism suppress Black women's leadership, pushing them to the margins of ecclesial life despite their call and competence.⁷⁰

Benjamin Knoll and Cammie Jo Bolin, in *She Preached the Word*, provide statistical data showing that Black clergywomen face significant disparities in ordination and leadership appointments, even with equal or greater qualifications.⁷¹ The Christian Citizen's 2022 article, "Unduly Unsupported," reports that Black clergywomen are often relegated to administrative or gender-specific ministry roles, despite being entrusted with the emotional and logistical labor of

⁶⁵ Monica A. Coleman, "Must I Be Womanist?" in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 85.

⁶⁶ Melanie C. Jones and Liz S. Alexander, "#MillennialWomanism," *Black Theology* 16, no. 3 (2018): 268.

⁶⁷ Nyasha Junior, *Reimagining Hagar: Blackness and Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 4.

⁶⁸ Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 21.

⁶⁹ Layli Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 35.

⁷⁰ Carolyn A. Knight, "Black Women Homileticians," in *Those Preaching Women: A Multicultural Collection*, ed. Ella Pearson Mitchell (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1996), 85.

⁷¹ Benjamin R. Knoll and Cammie Jo Bolin, *She Preached the Word: Women's Ordination in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 112.

the church.⁷² Cheryl Kirk-Duggan identifies this pattern as a form of theological violence, highlighting the church's capacity to function as a location of both sanctuary and subjugation.⁷³

Angela D. Sims connects the historical legacy of lynching and racial terror to contemporary pastoral contexts, arguing that Black clergywomen often bear the psychological weight of institutional silence. Stephanie M. Crumpton adds that the personal trauma Black clergywomen endure is compounded by their theological labor in contexts that resist their authority. Nicole Symmonds, writing on homiletics, challenges the tendency to tokenize Black women's preaching rather than accept them as theological authorities.

Other recent studies focus explicitly on Black clergywomen's vocational creativity and innovation in response to exclusion. Renita J. Weems's reflections on pastoral ministry highlight the personal and professional toll of being the first or only Black woman in leadership.⁷⁴ Marla Frederick documents the tension between personal call and institutional constraint in their ethnographic work with Black clergywomen.⁷⁵ Pamela R. Lightsey critiques heteronormativity in Black churches, emphasizing the marginalization of queer Black women clergy.⁷⁶ Teresa Fry Brown's research into Black women preachers further highlights how rhetorical and cultural expectations are often weaponized to control their ministerial expression.⁷⁷

⁷² Christian Citizen Staff, "Unduly Unsupported: The Plight of Black Clergywomen," *The Christian Citizen*, August 22, 2022. <https://christiancitizen.us/unduly-unsupported-the-plight-of-black-clergywomen/>.

⁷³ Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, *Exorcizing Evil: A Womanist Perspective on the Spirituals* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 45.

⁷⁴ Renita J. Weems, *Listening for God: A Minister's Journey Through Silence and Doubt* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 54.

⁷⁵ Marla F. Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 142.

⁷⁶ Pamela R. Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 78.

⁷⁷ Teresa L. Fry Brown, *Weary Throats and New Songs: Black Women Proclaiming God's Word* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 102.

In response to these challenges, a growing body of literature turns to chaplaincy as a liberatory vocational alternative. Wendy Cadge's *Spiritual Care: The Everyday Work of Chaplains* shows that chaplains operate in pluralistic spaces where care, not hierarchy, defines authority.⁷⁸ Winnifred Fallers Sullivan presents chaplaincy as a public theology of presence, arguing that chaplains work at the boundary of the sacred and secular, often creating new models of ministry.⁷⁹

Melanie C. Jones frames chaplaincy as a site of vocational reimagining: "Chaplaincy allows Black clergywomen to do theological work that centers care, community, and activism." Angela Sims contends that chaplaincy represents a Womanist practice of healing and leadership that redefines what it means to minister. Nancy Berlinger argues that chaplaincy's moral authority arises from listening, accompaniment, and justice, not title or status.

Recent doctoral research, such as that by Tamara Henry and Lori Banfield, explores how Black clergywomen redefine ministry through chaplaincy, centering authenticity, interfaith dialogue, and restorative presence. Melanie Harris, in her work on eco-womanism, calls for spiritually grounded leadership that responds to community needs and affirms the interconnection of all life—a call that many Black clergywomen answer through chaplaincy. In higher education specifically, chaplaincy offers Black clergywomen the freedom to integrate intellectual rigor, theological imagination, and care ethics without navigating the liturgical and doctrinal gatekeeping of many churches.

Unlike other forms of chaplaincy—such as military, healthcare, or carceral—where ministry is often shaped by institutional hierarchies, crisis care, or doctrinal limitations, higher

⁷⁸ Wendy Cadge, *Spiritual Care: The Everyday Work of Chaplains* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 56.

⁷⁹ Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *A Ministry of Presence: Chaplaincy, Spiritual Care, and the Law* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 3.

education chaplaincy allows for ongoing relational engagement across a broad and intellectually diverse population. Here, Black clergywomen serve not only students but also faculty, staff, administrators, alumni, and parents, positioning them as public theologians, institutional leaders, and agents of transformative care. These spaces support theological innovation rooted in presence, pedagogy, and prophetic witness.

Taken together, these scholars present the groundwork for establishing that chaplaincy is not simply an escape from church-based exclusion—it is a radical reimagining of ministry. Chaplaincy offers Black clergywomen a vocational home-place where they are not merely permitted to exist but fully empowered to lead, heal, and co-create spaces of justice and belonging.

This dissertation makes a timely and original contribution to Womanist theology, practical theology, and the growing field of chaplaincy studies by offering a constructive, vocational, and liberatory model—real spaces in higher education chaplaincy—as a vocational home-place for Black clergywomen. Where much of the existing scholarship has focused on documenting the systemic exclusion of Black clergywomen from traditional ecclesiastical leadership, this study intentionally shifts from critique to construction, from marginalization to imagination, and from diagnosis to design. It presents chaplaincy not merely as an alternative ministry, but as a site of theological innovation, institutional transformation, and spiritual empowerment for those long pushed to the periphery of religious authority.

Foundational Womanist theologians laid the critical groundwork by identifying the gendered and racialized erasures within both Black theology and white feminist theological traditions. Building upon this intellectual inheritance, second- and third-wave Womanists have deepened the focus on institutional reform, embodied leadership, and vocational transformation.

This dissertation builds on and extends these developments by situating higher education chaplaincy as a liberatory site where Black clergywomen embody new models of ministry that center healing, justice, and institutional accountability.

One of the project's most significant contributions lies in its use of bell hooks' theory of the home-place to reimagine chaplaincy as both a vocational refuge and a site of resistance. This framework allows chaplaincy to be interpreted not merely as professional work, but as Womanist theological praxis—a place where Black clergywomen can lead without having to justify their presence, and where the sacredness of their being is both affirmed and institutionalized. By bringing hooks' theoretical contributions into direct dialogue with higher education chaplaincy, this study develops a conceptual bridge between personal restoration and systemic change.

Additionally, this study introduces and applies an original methodological framework—Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography—which blends embodied ethnography, critical race analysis, and Womanist epistemology. It honors Black women's stories, feelings, spiritual insights, and bodily knowledge as legitimate sources of theological and academic inquiry. In using this method, the dissertation does not simply reflect on ministry; it enacts Womanist theological commitments through relational, reflexive, and liberative research practices. This method not only centers the lived experience of the researcher and her participants but also challenges normative paradigms of academic detachment by insisting that Black women's truths be felt, heard, and believed on their own terms.

Lastly, this dissertation fills a major gap in both Womanist and chaplaincy scholarship by foregrounding higher education chaplaincy as a site of theological significance and vocational transformation. While most research on Black clergywomen focuses on their roles in congregational ministry or denominational contexts, this study explores how their ministerial

identities flourish outside traditional ecclesial boundaries. In campus chaplaincy, Black clergywomen serve not only as spiritual caregivers but as justice advocates, institutional reformers, and community builders. Their work redefines ministry as something deeply relational, embodied, and institutionally generative. This context is particularly important for understanding how new forms of spiritual leadership are emerging among Black women whose callings were often stifled or dismissed in other church settings.

In short, this dissertation does not simply interrogate what is wrong with the Black Church or catalog the injustices Black clergywomen face. Rather, it amplifies the resilience, creativity, and theological brilliance of those who are already building new spaces of ministry. By locating higher education chaplaincy within Womanist theological traditions and centering the lived experience of Black clergywomen as both data and divine wisdom, this project makes a transformative intervention into ongoing conversations about race, gender, leadership, and vocation in theology and religious life. Its movement from critique to constructive praxis signals a new trajectory for theological scholarship—one grounded not only in the realities of exclusion, but in the sacred power of Black women’s innovation, care, and spiritual authority.

Chapter Overview and Dissertation Structure

This dissertation unfolds across four chapters, each building upon the central argument that higher education chaplaincy serves as a vocational home-place for Black clergywomen who have been historically marginalized by patriarchal and theological structures within the Black Church. The structure reflects an intentional progression—from theoretical and historical foundations, through methodological innovation and empirical findings, to forward-looking implications for ministry and leadership. Each chapter plays a critical role in advancing the

dissertation's claim that chaplaincy is not merely an alternative but a transformative model of liberatory ministry.

Chapter One: Historical Legacies and Theological Tensions

This chapter establishes the theological and historical foundation for understanding the central dilemma faced by Black clergywomen: their persistent marginalization within the Black Church, despite possessing deep spiritual authority, theological training, and a strong commitment to community. Drawing on both early and contemporary Womanist scholars, this chapter examines the complex web of theological, cultural, and institutional forces that have both upheld and challenged the exclusion of Black women from full ecclesial leadership.

While the Black Church has historically served as a site of resistance, cultural identity, and community empowerment, it has also acted as a gendered space where male-centered authority has often remained unchallenged. This chapter contends that the move toward chaplaincy must be understood within this ongoing tension between the liberative promise and patriarchal practices of the Black Church.

Foundational Womanist scholars have long challenged this dual reality. Jacquelyn Grant interrogated both Black and feminist theological discourses for their failure to affirm Black women's subjectivity, arguing that both traditions tended to speak about Black women rather than with or from them and calling for a theology that arises from the center of Black women's spiritual lives.⁸⁰ Katie Cannon's ethical framework affirms the wisdom embedded in Black women's daily struggles, treating embodied knowledge and everyday survival as legitimate sources of theological insight and practice.⁸¹ insisting that everyday survival is a legitimate

⁸⁰ Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 199.

⁸¹ Katie G. Cannon, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness," in *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 30.

theological practice. In *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Delores S. Williams builds on this ethic, centering a “hermeneutic of survival” rooted in Hagar’s wilderness story.⁸² Williams argues for an ethical response to the cross that validates Black women’s struggle rather than glorifying suffering.⁸³

This theological exclusion has been reinforced by respectability politics—a term coined by historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham to describe the strategies Black women used to navigate oppression by projecting moral, spiritual, and behavioral uprightness—alongside biblical literalism, both of which have often positioned male leadership as divinely ordained and female leadership as disruptive or inappropriate.⁸⁴

Biblical literalism, particularly as practiced in male-dominated church traditions, is often used to justify restrictive gender roles by appealing to selective readings of scripture. Respectability politics, as theorized by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in *Righteous Discontent*, describes the social and religious pressures placed on Black women to conform to moral and behavioral codes that uphold patriarchal and bourgeois ideals. When these two ideologies converge in ecclesial contexts, they create rigid frameworks that delegitimize women’s authority while reinforcing masculinist leadership as normative and divinely ordained.

Contemporary Womanist scholars have sharpened this analysis by offering institutional critique alongside theological innovation. Eboni Marshall Turman, in *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation*, articulates the ways in which patriarchy has been sacralized in the Black Church, arguing that it is not simply tolerated but embedded in the Church’s theological and institutional

⁸² Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 6.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁸⁴ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 186.

life.⁸⁵ Her critique of liturgical and doctrinal frameworks reveals the theological scaffolding that upholds exclusion. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, in *Mining the Motherlode*, contends that Womanist ethics must be a site of both resistance and reconstruction, requiring not only the critique of oppressive systems but also the creation of new visions of community grounded in justice and interdependence.⁸⁶ Their work insists that ecclesial liberation requires both theological courage and institutional reimagining.

Additional scholars expand this lens through historical and sociological insight. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, in *If It Wasn't for the Women...: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community*, highlights the paradox of Black women being the backbone of the Black Church while rarely occupying its pulpits.⁸⁷ Rosetta Ross's work on ethics and Black women's ministry explores how structures of ecclesial power continue to marginalize even highly educated and theologically trained Black clergywomen.⁸⁸ Anthea Butler's *Women in the Church of God in Christ* offers a case study of how holiness and Pentecostal traditions have simultaneously empowered and restricted women, demonstrating the denominational specificity of these broader dynamics.⁸⁹ Evelyn Parker, whose work focuses on adolescent spirituality and practical theology, underscores how Black women's ministerial identity is shaped through navigating institutional constraint with resilience and creativity.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 8.

⁸⁶ Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 5.

⁸⁷ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women...: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 122.

⁸⁸ Rosetta E. Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 56.

⁸⁹ Anthea D. Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 9.

⁹⁰ Evelyn L. Parker, *Trouble Don't Last Always: Emancipatory Hope Among African American Adolescents* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 33.

This chapter is necessary because it contextualizes the dissertation’s central tension—between exclusion and innovation—within a broader historical and theological landscape. It examines how Black clergywomen have long functioned as spiritual leaders without institutional recognition, navigating the invisible pulpits of their communities.⁹¹ The metaphor of the “stained-glass ceiling” captures this reality: it reflects both the visual centrality and structural invisibility of Black women in ecclesial life. While present, powerful, and often indispensable in church communities, Black clergywomen have historically been denied full access to ordination, preaching authority, and institutional leadership—creating a profound disconnect between calling and opportunity.

As the first chapter following the introduction, this section sets the tone for the theological, cultural, and methodological journey ahead. It sets the stage for the argument that the turn to chaplaincy by many Black clergywomen is not a retreat from ministry but a redefinition of it. Chaplaincy, particularly in higher education, offers a space to exercise spiritual leadership, theological imagination, and institutional influence without being bound by the gendered hierarchies and restrictive orthodoxies of traditional ecclesial life. By naming and tracing the theological and institutional logics that necessitate vocational departure, this chapter lays the foundation for understanding why higher education chaplaincy is not just a vocational alternative, but a Womanist-informed home-place—affirming, liberative, and profoundly prophetic.

⁹¹ Deborah F. Mullen, “The Ethics of Ministry: Formation and Transformation in Congregational Life,” in *New Wine: The Challenge of the Emerging Church to Mainline Congregations*, ed. Neal F. Fisher (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 117.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework and Methodology- Womanist Theology, Critical Race Theory, Social Strain Theory, Home-Place Theory, and Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography

This chapter constructs the interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological foundation that supports the dissertation's central claim: that higher education chaplaincy offers a liberatory vocational home-place for Black clergywomen who have been historically excluded from senior leadership in the Black Church. It brings together four critical frameworks—Womanist Theology, Critical Race Theory (CRT), Robert K. Merton's Social Strain Theory, and bell hooks' theory of the home-place—to analyze how race, gender, and institutional power shape Black clergywomen's ministerial experiences and how chaplaincy enables new models of spiritual leadership, justice-making, and care.

Womanist Theology functions as the ethical, theological, and epistemological core of the dissertation. Drawing from foundational thinkers like Katie G. Cannon, Delores S. Williams, and Jacquelyn Grant—as well as second- and third-wave Womanist scholars like Eboni Marshall Turman, Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Melanie C. Jones, and Monica A. Coleman—the chapter affirms that Black women's embodied knowledge, survival strategies, and moral wisdom constitute sacred theological data. Womanist theology critiques the exclusionary structures of both white feminist and traditional Black theological traditions while affirming spiritual leadership that centers justice, care, and wholeness. This framework guides the dissertation's interpretation of Black clergywomen's vocational choices as theologically grounded acts of resistance and innovation.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is then engaged to diagnose the systemic nature of racial and gendered exclusion across ecclesial and academic contexts. Drawing from Kimberlé Crenshaw's

intersectionality, Derrick Bell's permanence of racism, Patricia Williams's critique of structural privilege, and Mari Matsuda's call to "look to the bottom," the chapter frames Black clergywomen's exclusion not as anomalous but as indicative of broader institutional patterns. CRT emphasizes storytelling and counter-narrative, reinforcing this study's commitment to elevating Black women's testimonies as sources of theological and institutional critique.

Robert K. Merton's Social Strain Theory is applied to examine how Black clergywomen adapt to institutional barriers through vocational innovation. Merton's category of "innovation"—defined as accepting cultural goals while rejecting or redefining the institutional means to achieve them—helps conceptualize chaplaincy as an intentional and strategic deviation from ecclesial models that deny full inclusion. In this framing, chaplaincy is not a fallback but a visionary reimagination of ministry. The chapter uses Social Strain Theory to argue that the move to chaplaincy reflects both a rejection of blocked ecclesial pathways and a creative pursuit of more liberatory vocational possibilities.

bell hooks' theory of the home-place serves as an interpretive lens to understand chaplaincy not just as an institutional location, but as a sacred, relational space where healing, resistance, and theological innovation converge. Extending hooks' original description of the home-place as a site of quiet resistance against systemic dehumanization, the chapter interprets higher education chaplaincy as a contemporary vocational home-place where Black clergywomen can lead from wholeness, nurture community, and reclaim spiritual authority. This framework highlights chaplaincy as a space of both restoration and political resistance—one where care work becomes a theological and liberatory practice.

Building on these frameworks, the chapter introduces the dissertation's original methodological approach: Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography. This methodology is

developed to honor Black clergywomen's lived experiences as sacred and valid sources of knowledge. It responds to the historical erasure of Black women in both theology and research by combining critical reflexivity, Womanist ethics, sensory ethnography, and autoethnographic storytelling. This approach allows for layered interpretation, where the researcher's own vocational journey as a Black clergywoman is analyzed alongside the stories of participants, producing theological insights grounded in care, embodiment, and communal wisdom.

The "Critical" dimension draws on CRT to name and analyze the structural racism, sexism, and theological gatekeeping that shape religious institutions. The "Womanist" foundation affirms that survival, spiritual leadership, and justice are sacred acts, and insists that research be accountable to the well-being and autonomy of Black women. The "Sensory" element emphasizes that knowledge is felt, carried, and enacted—attending to voice, touch, movement, silence, atmosphere, and spiritual intuition. This sensory data reveals dimensions of exclusion and healing that more abstract methods might miss. Finally, autoethnography allows the researcher's own story to be positioned as both theological text and critical lens, deepening the analysis through personal narrative.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with ten Black clergywomen in higher education chaplaincy, participant observation in spiritual and educational spaces, and extensive field notes from communal practices of worship and care. These sources are treated not as extractable content but as sacred narratives to be interpreted with relational attentiveness and theological care. The methodology honors the voices of Black clergywomen not as passive subjects but as co-interpreters of their own lives, ministries, and institutional transformations.

In sum, this chapter establishes both the conceptual scaffolding and methodological integrity of the study. It equips the dissertation with a framework that is simultaneously

theological, sociological, political, and embodied. The chapter argues that the shift to chaplaincy is a form of sacred innovation: a response to exclusion that not only critiques inherited institutions but generates new models of care, authority, and liberatory vocation. By integrating theory and method, this chapter affirms that Black clergywomen are not merely reacting to exclusion—they are reimagining ministry itself.

Chapter Three: Embodied Testimony- Autoethnography and the “Real Spaces” of Higher Education Chaplaincy

This chapter brings together the dissertation’s methodological framework and core narrative findings to illuminate how Black clergywomen experience, embody, and reimagine ministry within higher education chaplaincy. Using the original framework of Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography, the chapter combines the researcher’s own vocational story with interview data from ten Black women chaplains to portray chaplaincy in the academy as a liberatory “real space.” In this context, ministry becomes a dynamic site of spiritual leadership, embodied care, and justice-rooted transformation—unconstrained by the patriarchal norms of traditional ecclesial institutions.

The chapter opens with an autoethnographic narrative that traces the researcher’s vocational shift from exclusion within the Black Church to affirmation and innovation in the university setting. These personal reflections are treated as theological data, offering insight into how chaplaincy within higher education has become a site of vocational wholeness, spiritual recovery, and ministerial authority. The researcher’s story of navigating institutional harm, finding space for authenticity, and building relationships in the academy serves as an anchor for understanding the broader phenomenon.

These reflections are brought into dialogue with narratives from other Black clergywomen in higher education chaplaincy. Participants describe their campuses as complex but generative environments where they are free to lead without apology. Unburdened by doctrinal gatekeeping or rigid hierarchy, they cultivate spiritually grounded spaces of belonging, care, and resistance. Their leadership spans student engagement, faculty support, interfaith programming, institutional critique, and public theology—demonstrating the multivalent and vocationally rich nature of chaplaincy in the academy.

This chapter is grounded in a Womanist theological epistemology that affirms Black women's lived and embodied experiences as sacred sources of knowledge. Participants' stories are organized thematically around concepts such as “ministering without apology,” “vocational home-place,” “institutional impact,” and “leading from the margins.” Their testimonies affirm that higher education chaplaincy is not a fallback or secondary calling but a deliberate, visionary response to exclusion—one that allows them to embody care, justice, and leadership on their own terms.

Sensory data—how campus environments feel, how spiritual conversations unfold, how chaplains embody presence and care—are central to the analysis. Building on the work of scholars such as Katie Cannon, Melanie C. Jones, and Monica A. Coleman, the chapter affirms that spiritual leadership in the academy is deeply embodied and relational. The sensory dimensions of chaplaincy—its reliance on tone, posture, environment, and atmosphere—are treated as vital to the creation of spaces that feel safe, sacred, and transformative.

Participants also reflect on their institutional influence. In environments increasingly shaped by political pressure, shrinking resources, and attacks on DEI, these chaplains act as moral anchors. They advocate for equity, support student activism, mentor marginalized faculty

and staff, and model inclusive leadership that resists institutional apathy. Their presence often catalyzes cultural shifts on campus, expanding the moral and spiritual imagination of the university.

The work of theologians such as Pamela Lightsey, Courtney Goto, and Elaine Graham is engaged to interpret chaplaincy as a practical theology in action—one that fuses the prophetic and the pastoral, the academic and the sacred. Drawing from spiritual care theorists like John Swinton and Christopher Swift, the chapter positions chaplains as vocational leaders who walk alongside campus communities through moments of crisis, transition, and renewal. The challenges they navigate—especially as Black women—require not just theological skill, but deep cultural fluency and institutional resilience.

The methodology itself is informed by decolonial commitments, drawing from Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s vision of research that serves and is accountable to marginalized communities. The stories gathered are not extracted data but co-constructed testimonies—held with care, interpreted with integrity, and presented as sacred contributions to both scholarship and ministry.

Ultimately, this chapter affirms that Black clergywomen in higher education chaplaincy are not simply adapting to exclusion—they are building visionary models of ministry. In their care work, public theology, institutional advocacy, and embodied presence, they redefine what it means to lead with integrity, to minister from the margins, and to create “real spaces” where healing, justice, and spiritual transformation are possible.

Chapter Four: Reimagining Ministry and the Future of Higher Education Chaplaincy

This final chapter draws together the core insights of the dissertation and repositions higher education chaplaincy—not merely as a refuge for Black clergywomen, but as a visionary model for the future of ministry. It argues that chaplaincy represents a liberatory, justice-centered

alternative to traditional ecclesial structures, especially in today's volatile sociopolitical climate. At a time when the resurgence of Trump-era politics, white Christian nationalism, and far-right religious rhetoric threatens both higher education and the integrity of faith traditions, the role of Black clergywomen in academic chaplaincy becomes even more urgent.

Within this climate, chaplaincy challenges conventional paradigms of ministry that rely on hierarchical, male-dominated, and doctrinally rigid frameworks. Instead, it elevates relational care, cultural fluency, and liberative leadership rooted in embodied presence and spiritual accountability. In higher education—where massive budget cuts, attacks on DEI initiatives, and political interference seek to narrow the intellectual and ethical horizons of students—chaplaincy provides a moral compass and a spiritual anchor. Black clergywomen chaplains are not merely offering care; they are actively shaping campus culture, modeling alternative theologies, and standing as prophetic witnesses to justice and truth.

This chapter argues that chaplaincy enacts the Womanist theological vision of ministry that is responsive to suffering, deeply rooted in care, and accountable to the lived experiences of Black women. It centers survival, embodiment, and collective well-being as sacred priorities, reflecting Delores Williams's insistence that survival and quality of life must be treated as theological priorities.⁹² Chaplaincy realizes this by offering space for students, faculty, and staff to be fully human—especially amid grief, trauma, uncertainty, or marginalization.

The chapter also issues a call to seminaries, theological institutions, and church bodies to recognize chaplaincy as a central, not peripheral, expression of ministry. Rather than treating it as a fallback career path, these institutions must integrate chaplaincy's core practices—interfaith engagement, anti-racism, trauma-informed care—into their curricula and ecclesial leadership

⁹² Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 196.

models. As Eboni Marshall Turman argues, theological education that fails to interrogate patriarchy and white supremacy cannot adequately prepare leaders for liberative ministry.⁹³

Chaplaincy, then, is a vital corrective—a public, embodied theology of justice and care.

This chapter challenges colleges and universities to go beyond symbolic support for spiritual life and meaningfully invest in chaplaincy as a transformative resource. That includes funding, structural inclusion, and ensuring chaplains—especially Black clergywomen—are empowered with authority and visibility. As one participant stated, “I’m not just here to pray at vigils—I’m here to shape what justice and healing look like on this campus.”⁹⁴ In an era of institutional fragility, chaplaincy offers stability, vision, and integrity.

Drawing again on bell hooks’ theory of the home-place, the chapter frames chaplaincy as both sanctuary and site of resistance. It is where liberatory spiritual practice takes root—in counseling rooms, campus rituals, and spontaneous conversations that affirm life, dignity, and truth. Chaplaincy becomes a space where Black clergywomen are not merely surviving systems of oppression—they are transforming them from within.

Ultimately, this chapter affirms that higher education chaplaincy is not a secondary form of ministry—it is a prophetic intervention. In a time of spiritual distortion and institutional retrenchment, chaplaincy offers a counter-testimony: a public, embodied, and justice-rooted ministry led by those once pushed to the margins. Black clergywomen are not adapting to exclusion—they are reimagining ministry as healing, as justice, and as home.

⁹³ Eboni Marshall Turman, “Toward a Womanist Public Theology of Radical Justice,” in *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 135.

⁹⁴ Interview with study participant, conducted by the author, March 2025.

Conclusion: From Exclusion to Embodied Possibility

This introduction has laid the groundwork for a study that is at once theological, historical, methodological, and deeply personal. By situating the exclusion of Black clergywomen within the dual frameworks of ecclesiastical history and systemic power, it becomes clear that their marginalization in the Black Church is neither accidental nor anomalous. It is rooted in traditions, theologies, and institutional norms that too often fail to affirm the full humanity and spiritual authority of Black women. Yet in response to this exclusion, Black clergywomen are not retreating—they are reimagining ministry itself.

Drawing on Womanist theology, Critical Race Theory, Social Strain Theory, and bell hooks' theory of the home-place, this dissertation constructs a multifaceted framework to interrogate and affirm the vocational transformations Black clergywomen undertake as they enter higher education chaplaincy. These theoretical lenses reveal the intersecting oppressions they navigate—and the radical leadership they embody in response. Rather than waiting to be granted space, Black clergywomen are creating spaces rooted in care, justice, and authenticity. These are not merely alternatives to exclusionary ministry—they represent profound innovations in spiritual leadership.

This introduction also articulates the methodological foundation of the study: Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography. This approach affirms that Black clergywomen's embodied experiences are sacred texts in their own right—worthy of study, reflection, and theological engagement. Through narrative, emotion, and sensory insight, this methodology reveals the often-overlooked textures of vocational life, offering new pathways for understanding ministry as it is lived, felt, and practiced. By centering these lived experiences, the dissertation not only contributes to scholarly discourse but also affirms a deeper truth: Black women's stories are

sacred, and their wisdom must be central to the future of theological education and pastoral practice.

By grounding this work in the emerging but still underdeveloped scholarship on chaplaincy as a liberatory space, the dissertation offers both a critique of dominant ecclesial paradigms and a constructive vision for what ministry can become. Higher education chaplaincy emerges here as a home-place—a real space where theological imagination, spiritual care, and institutional influence converge on Black women’s terms.

As the dissertation progresses, each chapter builds upon this foundation: tracing the historical roots of exclusion, articulating a Womanist methodological framework, analyzing the lived experiences of Black clergywomen in chaplaincy, and envisioning chaplaincy’s broader potential to reshape how we understand vocation, leadership, and sacred authority. What follows is not merely a scholarly inquiry but a collective testimony of transformation—a declaration that higher education chaplaincy, as led by Black clergywomen, is already reimagining what the future of liberatory ministry looks like.

This reimagination is especially urgent in today’s political and cultural climate. The resurgence of Trump-era politics—marked by white Christian nationalism, authoritarian rhetoric, and overt misogyny—has emboldened a movement that distorts religious language to justify exclusion, control, and violence. The religious right, long aligned with patriarchal interpretations of Christianity, has reasserted itself as a dominant political force by championing so-called “family values,” even as its figureheads model none. Simultaneously, sweeping cuts to higher education, attacks on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts, and legislative crackdowns on academic freedom threaten the university’s role as a space of inquiry, belonging, and liberation.

Within this volatile landscape, the work of Black clergywomen in higher education chaplaincy is not only significant—it is urgent. These ministers do more than offer spiritual care; they embody a public theology of presence, justice, and resistance. Their ministries challenge both the institutional Church and the academy to reckon with their failures and to imagine new models of leadership rooted in healing, truth-telling, and theological courage. As public theologians, they confront the misuse of faith for political gain and reclaim spiritual authority from systems that weaponize religion against the very people it should empower.

Amid a culture that seeks to suppress liberatory knowledge and a religious movement increasingly shaped by exclusionary dogma, Black clergywomen chaplains create “real spaces” of refuge, reflection, and resistance—where care, equity, and communal transformation remain possible. Their work is not an escape from struggle; it is a prophetic witness within it. These chaplains serve as cultural mediators, intercessors, and visionaries—bridging sacred and secular, tending to the wounded, and enacting an ethic of hope, accountability, and embodied presence.

This dissertation is not merely a vocational or theological intervention—it is a timely and necessary response to the spiritual, cultural, and institutional crises of our era. It affirms that Black clergywomen are not peripheral to the future of ministry; they are defining it. And in that defining, they illuminate a liberating path forward—not in spite of these perilous times, but precisely because of them.

Chapter One: Historical Legacies and Theological Tensions- The Black Church and the Stained-Glass Ceiling

The Black Church as Historical Home-Place: From Hush Harbor to Holy Ground

The Black Church has long functioned as one of the most enduring and complex institutions in African American life—a site of refuge, formation, resistance, and communal imagination. It is often described as the spiritual womb of Black America: the institution that held collective grief when no other would, nurtured hope amid terror, and taught generations of Black people how to make meaning amid dispossession. Yet this same Church that fostered survival and prophetic resistance also reproduced patriarchal structures that constrained Black women’s spiritual authority and vocational flourishing. From its earliest emergence, the Black Church carried a paradox within its bones: it was simultaneously a house of liberation and a house of limitation.

This paradox cannot be understood apart from place. The Black Church did not originate as a theological abstraction, doctrinal system, or denominational structure; it emerged as a spatial practice—an act of sacred world-making under constraint. In the heavy darkness of antebellum nights, small circles of enslaved Africans gathered beneath tree canopies, in ravines, or in secluded clearings far from plantation surveillance. Someone whispered a prayer— “Lord, we come tonight, hidden but not forsaken.” Bodies pressed close. Songs rose softly. Scripture was remembered rather than read. These gatherings were known as hush harbors.⁹⁵

In the hush harbor, enslaved Africans fashioned a sanctuary from the wilderness. There were no pulpits, no ordination rites, no ecclesial offices. There were bodies, breath, rhythm, memory, and a God encountered beyond the reach of white authority. These gatherings were not

⁹⁵Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 212.

merely devotional; they were acts of theological rebellion. They enacted a refusal to worship a God conscripted to justify captivity and instead proclaimed a God who hears the cries of the oppressed and walks with them through the wilderness. In this sense, the hush harbor represents not only the historical origin of the Black Church but its earliest Womanist epistemology—one grounded in embodied knowledge, communal survival, and sacred space created under threat.

To name the hush harbor epistemology is to recognize that Black religious life was shaped from the outset by improvisation, relational authority, and spiritual discernment rooted in lived experience rather than institutional validation. Long before formal denominations existed, enslaved Africans interpreted Scripture through the lens of suffering and survival. They did not inherit Christianity passively; they reimagined it. African cosmologies of communal spirituality, rhythm, ancestor awareness, and the porous boundary between sacred and secular did not vanish during the Middle Passage. As scholars such as John Mbiti and Sterling Stuckey have shown, these traditions adapted, resurfacing through ring shouts, call-and-response worship, and collective lament.⁹⁶ The God of the hush harbor was not the God of plantation discipline but the God of Exodus—a God who sees, hears, and acts on behalf of those rendered invisible.⁹⁷

The hush harbor thus functioned as a proto-home-place: a spiritual homeland carved from hostile terrain. It anticipated the institutional Black Church but did so with a fluid, improvisational sensibility rather than a fixed hierarchy. That sensibility—this capacity to make holy space under constraint—would become a defining feature of Black religious life and a crucial interpretive thread for understanding Black women’s later vocational innovations. When

⁹⁶ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 2; Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 16.

⁹⁷ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1975), 63.

Black clergywomen discern that institutional religious spaces no longer sustain life, they draw on this ancestral inheritance, seeking or creating new sacred geographies in response.

Reconstruction and the Gendering of Ecclesial Authority

Emancipation transformed clandestine gatherings into public institutions. In the first years after slavery, freedpeople across the South built thousands of churches—often before they built schools or homes. These early sanctuaries were constructed from scrap wood, salvaged bricks, and communal labor. Someone hung a wash-boiler lid as a bell; others stacked pine benches; an elder read from a weathered Bible. The structures leaned, but the people stood straight. They named their churches Mount Zion, New Hope, Friendship—names that transformed freedom into geography. In building these churches, freedpeople did more than worship; they claimed the land beneath their feet as sacred. Turning stolen land into sanctuary became a theological act.

These post-emancipation churches served multiple functions. They were houses of worship, schools, political meeting places, mutual-aid centers, and sites of Black citizenship. Within their walls, Black people practiced forms of autonomy long denied under slavery. The Black Church became a space where literacy was cultivated, leadership trained, political consciousness sharpened, and collective identity affirmed. As Lincoln and Mamiya famously observed, the Black Church functioned for generations as the primary autonomous sphere of Black life.⁹⁸ Its theology fused spiritual hope with social transformation, sustaining communities through Reconstruction's brief promises and brutal betrayals.

⁹⁸ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 1.

Yet Reconstruction also marked the moment when ecclesial authority became increasingly gendered. As churches formalized governance structures—constitutions, conferences, ordination processes, and clerical titles—leadership was codified as male. Women’s authority, though deeply embedded in congregational life, was redirected into auxiliary structures: missionary societies, women’s conventions, choir leadership, and Christian education. These spaces were powerful yet structurally separate from the pulpit and from sacramental authority. Women built the Church’s infrastructure while being excluded from its formal decision-making centers.

This gendering of authority was not incidental. In a post-slavery society that systematically denied Black men public power, the Black male pastor emerged as a symbol of racial uplift and communal respectability. Clerical masculinity became a site where Black men could reclaim authority denied in civic life. The consolidation of male pastoral leadership thus served both theological and socio-political functions, even as it narrowed the imaginative space for women’s leadership.⁹⁹

Women’s Conventions as Parallel Authority and Sacred Infrastructure

As formal ecclesial authority consolidated around male leadership during Reconstruction, Black women did not retreat from institutional life. Instead, they built parallel structures of authority that sustained the Church even as they were excluded from its pulpit-centered power. Women’s conventions, missionary societies, and auxiliary organizations became sites where Black women exercised theological leadership, financial governance, educational vision, and moral authority—often on a scale that rivaled or exceeded that of male clergy bodies.

⁹⁹ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 187.

The National Baptist Convention's Women's Auxiliary, formally organized in 1900, offers a paradigmatic example. Under leaders such as Nannie Helen Burroughs, Black women mobilized large-scale fundraising, supported global missions, established schools, and shaped denominational priorities. Burroughs's "*National Training School for Women and Girls*" was not merely a vocational institution; it was a theological project grounded in the conviction that Black women's education was essential to racial survival and spiritual flourishing. Her oft-quoted emphasis on the "*Three B's—Bible, Bath, and Broom*" fused theological formation, bodily dignity, and economic self-sufficiency into a coherent Womanist ethic long before the term existed.¹⁰⁰

These women's conventions served as alternative ecclesial centers—spaces where Black women preached, taught, organized, debated doctrine, and managed budgets. They set agendas, issued resolutions, and articulated moral visions that shaped congregational life. In practice, they exercised theological, economic, and communal authority. Yet this authority remained structurally unrecognized within the Church's formal hierarchies. Women could build institutions, but they could not officially be the institution.

This arrangement created a paradoxical power dynamic without formal title. Women's conventions served as the backbone of denominational life, funding church expansion, sustaining missionary efforts, and stabilizing congregations during economic crises. At the same time, their authority was framed as "supportive" rather than governing, auxiliary rather than primary. The Church relied on women's leadership while refusing to integrate it into formal decision-making structures.

¹⁰⁰ Nannie Helen Burroughs, "The Negro Woman's Part in Racial Advancement," *The Negro Churchman* 4, no. 2 (1912): 12.

From a Womanist perspective, these parallel systems represent neither failure nor accommodation but creative resistance under constraint. Black women recognized that waiting for institutional permission would mean abandoning urgent needs. Instead, they built what the institution would not grant. In doing so, they enacted a theology of survival rooted in communal care, strategic imagination, and embodied leadership.¹⁰¹

At the same time, the existence of women's conventions inadvertently reinforced the Church's gendered architecture. By channeling women's authority into separate structures, denominations could affirm women's labor without confronting male dominance at the center. Parallel authority thus served both as liberation and containment—empowering Black women while stabilizing patriarchal ecclesiology.

This pattern has lasting implications for Black clergywomen's vocational trajectories. Women learned early that the Church would rely on their leadership while denying their legitimacy. They learned to build sacred infrastructure without recognition, exercise authority without title, and lead from the margins of formal power. These skills—organizational fluency, relational leadership, theological creativity, and resilience under constraint—would later prove transferable beyond congregational settings.

Seen in this light, women's conventions were not peripheral to Black ecclesial history; they were training grounds for alternative leadership models. They cultivated forms of authority that were relational rather than hierarchical, mission-driven rather than office-bound, and responsive to communal needs rather than institutional status. These same capacities would later

¹⁰¹ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 161.

enable Black clergywomen to recognize chaplaincy and other non-parochial ministries as legitimate extensions of their calling.

Thus, women's conventions served as early Womanist laboratories of ecclesiology—spaces where Black women practiced leadership in anticipation of institutions that could one day fully recognize them. They show that Black women's movement toward chaplaincy is not a departure from church leadership but a continuation of a long tradition of building sacred space alongside, beneath, and beyond patriarchal structures.

The Great Migration and the Professionalization of Ministry

The Great Migration intensified these dynamics. As millions of Black Southerners moved north and west, the Church traveled with them, reborn in storefronts, basements, converted synagogues, and rented auditoriums. Urban churches offered migrants moral continuity amid industrial alienation and racial hostility. Worship practices adapted to new environments, and gospel music—shaped by figures such as Thomas A. Dorsey and carried by voices like Mahalia Jackson—translated Southern lament into urban rhythm, becoming a sonic home-place carried in the body.

Urbanization also accelerated the professionalization of ministry. Large congregations required administrative expertise, public leadership, and institutional visibility. The senior pastor increasingly served as both spiritual leader and public representative of the Black community. This role was overwhelmingly masculinized. As churches grew into “cathedral” institutions, clerical authority became more centralized, and access to pulpits, salaries, and public platforms became tightly controlled.

Women sustained congregational life through choirs, benevolence ministries, Christian education, and pastoral care. They organized budgets, fed congregations, mentored youth, and

helped stabilize communities navigating economic precarity. Yet their authority remained largely informal and undervalued. The very process that expanded the Church's influence simultaneously rendered women's leadership invisible, framing it as service rather than governance.

At the margins of respectability, the Holiness and Pentecostal movements offered alternative models. Women such as Lucy Farrow, Rosa Horn, and Mother Lizzie Robinson preached, prophesied, healed, and organized religious networks that defied denominational norms. These women embodied what Stacey Floyd-Thomas describes as disruptive holiness—a spirituality that refused containment within bourgeois respectability or patriarchal decorum.¹⁰² Yet mainstream Black denominations often dismissed these movements as excessive, emotional, or improper, reinforcing boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable female authority.¹⁰³

Civil Rights, Memory, and Gendered Erasure

The Civil Rights era marked the Black Church's most visible public role. Sanctuaries became strategy rooms; pulpits became podiums. Churches organized boycotts, marches, and voter registration drives, and clergy emerged as public moral leaders. Yet the dominant narrative of this period has centered almost exclusively on male leadership, obscuring the foundational labor of women such as Ella Baker, Septima Clark, Diane Nash, and Fannie Lou Hamer.¹⁰⁴

These women were architects of movement strategy, political education, and moral vision. They cultivated grassroots leadership, challenged charismatic male dominance, and

¹⁰² Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 87.

¹⁰³ Anthea Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 45.

¹⁰⁴ Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 2; Septima P. Clark, *Ready from Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Africa World Press, 1986), 3.

insisted on participatory democracy. Yet their contributions were often framed as supportive rather than directive, reinforcing a gendered division of labor within the movement and the Church that sustained it. The masculinization of Civil Rights memory has had lasting consequences, shaping contemporary assumptions about who counts as a legitimate religious leader.

The Intensification of the Paradox

By the late twentieth century, the paradox at the heart of the Black Church intensified. Black women increasingly outnumbered men in congregations, funded church operations, staffed nearly every ministry, and earned seminary degrees equal to or higher than those of their male counterparts. Yet access to ordination, senior leadership, and sacramental authority remained restricted. Women lived in the home-place they helped build, but they could not hold its keys.

This section outlines the historical and theological conditions under which Black clergywomen discern, negotiate, and embody their callings. It argues that the Black Church's liberatory power and its patriarchal exclusions are not contradictory accidents but historically co-produced realities. The very structures that enabled the Church's public authority simultaneously limited the range of bodies authorized to lead it. Understanding this paradox is essential for interpreting Black women's vocational journeys—and for grasping why many ultimately seek new ministerial geographies where home-place can be lived without erasure.

Theological Roots of Gendered Exclusion: Scripture, Interpretation, and the Architecture of Hierarchy

The patriarchal constraints that continue to shape women's leadership in the Black Church did not enter primarily through formal policy or denominational decree. They entered through interpretation—through inherited habits of reading Scripture, constructing doctrine, and imagining divine authority. Long before exclusion was codified in church law, it was normalized

through theological frameworks that felt self-evident, timeless, and biblically mandated. This section traces how particular interpretive traditions, colonial God-images, and ecclesial theologies of order produced a sacred architecture in which male authority appeared natural and women's leadership suspect.

Christian Scripture itself emerged within ancient Mediterranean societies structured by patriarchy. Yet patriarchal social contexts do not necessitate patriarchal theology. What demands explanation is how interpretive traditions repeatedly selected, elevated, and universalized certain texts and readings while muting others—transforming contingent pastoral counsel into permanent ecclesial order. Over centuries, male-dominated commentary traditions, Eurocentric translation practices, and ecclesial governance converged to produce what can be understood as an architecture of hierarchy: a theological commonsense that organizes power symbolically, spatially, and institutionally.

Scripture as Interpreted Authority

Appeals to Pauline injunctions on women's silence and submission have long served as the theological cornerstone for excluding women from preaching and leadership. These passages—particularly those in 1 Corinthians 14 and the Pastoral Epistles—are often treated as straightforward prohibitions. Yet Womanist and feminist biblical scholars have shown that these letters are situational correspondence, written to address specific disruptions within early Christian communities rather than to establish universal norms for women across time. Reading them as timeless governance severs them from their rhetorical and historical contexts and elevates pastoral problem-solving into permanent theological law.

The authority of these readings was further solidified through reception history. While no single translation alone “created” patriarchy, the cumulative effect of centuries of interpretive

decisions—including gendered assumptions embedded in language, emphasis, and commentary—produced a theological environment in which male authority became synonymous with faithfulness. Over time, the repeated performance of these interpretations in sermons, lectionaries, denominational manuals, and theological education trained congregations to experience patriarchy not as interpretation but as revelation.

The consequence is that exclusion appears divinely ordered rather than historically constructed. When women face resistance to their leadership, the refusal is often framed not as an institutional preference but as obedience to Scripture itself.

Exegetical Case Study I: Junia and the Politics of Apostolic Memory

Romans 16:7 names Junia as “prominent among the apostles,” placing her among the highest ranks of early Christian authority. For centuries, this verse stood largely uncontested. Early Church Fathers, including John Chrysostom, recognized Junia as a woman and an apostle, marveling at her faith and leadership. The problem with Junia did not arise in the first century; it emerged much later, when women’s authority became theologically inconvenient.¹⁰⁵

Beginning in the medieval period and intensifying in modern biblical scholarship, Junia was gradually masculinized into “*Junias*”—a name that does not appear elsewhere in ancient sources. This shift was not the result of new manuscript evidence but of interpretive discomfort. The presence of a female apostle destabilized later ecclesial hierarchies that reserved authority for men. Rather than re-examining those hierarchies, interpreters altered the text’s reception.¹⁰⁶

This exegetical move shows that theological exclusion is produced not by Scripture alone but by the politics of interpretation. Junia’s erasure shows that women’s authority is not absent

¹⁰⁵ Eldon Jay Epp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 32.

¹⁰⁶ Bernadette J. Brooken, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 141.

from the biblical record; it is actively suppressed when it threatens established power structures. The masculinization of Junia serves as a theological precedent: when women's leadership becomes undeniable, interpretation is reshaped to render it invisible.

For Black clergywomen, Junia's story resonates deeply. Many report being affirmed for their gifts while being told that Scripture does not support women's authority. Junia shows that such claims are less about biblical fidelity than about preserving inherited hierarchies. The denial of women's leadership today echoes the text's erasure of women's leadership.

Exegetical Case Study II: 1 Timothy 2 and the Institutionalization of Silence

If Junia represents the suppression of women's authority, 1 Timothy 2 represents the institutionalization of women's silence. The passage—"I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man"—is often cited as definitive. Yet the Pastoral Epistles address specific challenges within early Christian communities, such as false teaching, social disorder, and the fragile public reputation of fledgling congregations in Greco-Roman society.

Womanist scholars emphasize that this text cannot be read in isolation from its context. The letter addresses a community facing external scrutiny and internal instability. The directive limiting women's teaching is a crisis measure rather than a universal doctrine. Yet, over centuries of ecclesial repetition, the passage has been abstracted from its context and transformed into a permanent rule governing women's authority.

This transformation shows how theology becomes architecture. A situational instruction hardens into a structural prohibition. Over time, that prohibition becomes embedded in ordination processes, denominational policies, and congregational culture. The text becomes a gatekeeping mechanism rather than a pastoral tool.

Jarena Lee's nineteenth-century experience in the African Methodist Episcopal Church offers a concrete example. When Lee described feeling called to preach as "a fire shut up in my bones," she drew on prophetic language deeply rooted in Scripture. Yet Bishop Richard Allen initially denied her request, citing Pauline restrictions. Only after witnessing the undeniable power of her preaching did he relent—and even then, her authority was framed as an exception rather than as recognition. Lee's calling did not change; the Church's tolerance did.

This pattern persists. Black clergywomen today often face theological gaslighting: their spiritual experiences are affirmed privately yet denied institutional legitimacy. Scripture is invoked not to discern the Spirit's movement but to contain it.

Colonial Christianity and the Gendered God-Image

These interpretive patterns were reinforced by the Black Church's inheritance of Western Protestantism, itself shaped by empire, patriarchy, and racial hierarchy. Missionary Christianity carried not only the Christian gospel but also a social order in which divine authority mirrored imperial power. God was imagined as male, sovereign, and enthroned above a world structured by submission. Conversion often entailed the internalization of gendered domestic ideals, in which moral order was maintained through male headship and female virtue.¹⁰⁷

Within this framework, patriarchal family structures became theological symbols. Holiness was associated with order, obedience, and containment. Anthea Butler's work on Holiness and Pentecostal traditions shows how the moral imagination was reshaped around gendered respectability, replacing the plantation hierarchy with a sanctified domestic order. Patriarchy did not disappear; it was baptized.

¹⁰⁷ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 243.

The paradox of the Black Church is especially evident here. Even as Black Christians rejected white supremacy and asserted spiritual autonomy, they often retained patriarchal images of God inherited from colonial Christianity. The result was a theology that could name racial oppression as sin while leaving gender hierarchy largely unexamined.

Early Black Liberation Theology made decisive contributions to dismantling white theological supremacy, yet its earliest formulations often centered Black male experience as representative of the race. Jacquelyn Grant's critique exposed this limitation with clarity and force. Grant argued that a theology claiming liberation while ignoring Black women's oppression remains structurally incomplete. By universalizing Black male experience, liberation theology replicated internally the very exclusions it condemned externally.¹⁰⁸

Womanist Counter-Theology and the God Who Appear Elsewhere

Delores Williams deepened this corrective by reinterpreting biblical narratives through the lens of survival rather than sacrifice. Her reading of Hagar is particularly instructive. Cast out of Abraham's household and forced into the wilderness, Hagar encounters God not within patriarchal protection but beyond it. God meets her precisely where male authority has expelled her. In Williams's interpretation, Hagar becomes a theologian of survival, revealing a God who does not require women's subordination for redemption.¹⁰⁹

This theological reversal destabilizes traditional soteriological assumptions that sanctify hierarchical suffering and undermines the colonial God-image embedded in patriarchal ecclesiology. Within a Womanist hermeneutic, divine presence is not confined to sanctioned spaces of authority; it appears in exile, displacement, and survival. Authority is redefined not as domination but as accompaniment.

¹⁰⁸ Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 198.

¹⁰⁹ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 20.

Katie Cannon further reframes theological authority by centering embodied moral wisdom.¹¹⁰ For Cannon, ethics emerges from lived experience—especially the daily negotiations required to survive unjust systems. Black women’s ethical reasoning is forged not in abstraction but in practice: caregiving, organizing, resisting, and discerning under constraint. This perspective challenges ecclesial models that separate theology from life and authority from embodiment.

Within this framework, interpretation itself becomes a site of resistance. Reading Scripture through Black women’s experiences dethrones inherited hierarchies and reveals divine presence in places institutional theology has overlooked. Theology is evaluated not by its capacity to preserve order but by its capacity to sustain life.

Embodied Hermeneutics and Sacred Atmosphere

Theological exclusion is never merely doctrinal. It is enacted through embodied cues—such as who is permitted to speak, whose voice is amplified, and whose authority is provisional. Over time, these practices lead to the internalization of a hierarchy that feels sacred rather than constructed. Patriarchy becomes not only a belief but an atmosphere that shapes what leadership looks, sounds, and feels like.

Womanist scholars insist that the body is not peripheral to interpretation; it is central. As Cannon argues, embodied moral wisdom constitutes theological knowledge. For Black women in the Church, theology is not abstract speculation, but practiced discernment forged in the tension between calling and constraint. Their bodies remember what institutions forget: that the Spirit speaks through flesh, breath, and presence.

¹¹⁰ Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 95.

This embodied hermeneutic also clarifies why exclusion is experienced as spiritual injury rather than mere disappointment. When theology denies the legitimacy of women's authority, it does so not only cognitively but also sensorially—through silence, surveillance, and spatial restriction. These experiences teach women to doubt not only their place in the Church but also their trust in their own spiritual knowing.

From Theological Inheritance to Cultural Enforcement

This section has traced the theological roots of gendered exclusion as an inherited interpretive architecture—shaped by selective readings of Scripture, colonial God-images, and ecclesial theologies of order. These theological patterns are not abstract. They are embodied in cultural norms, aesthetic expectations, spatial arrangements, and moral scripts that discipline bodies and regulate belonging.

The following section examines how these theological inheritances are enforced through respectability politics, racialized gender stereotypes, sacred architecture, and institutional aesthetics—thereby forming the cultural system of containment that sustains the stained-glass ceiling.

The Cultural System of Containment: Respectability, Stereotype, Architecture, and the Stained-Glass Ceiling

If theology supplied the logic of exclusion, culture supplied its enforcement. The patriarchal interpretive traditions traced in the previous section did not remain confined to doctrinal claims or denominational policy. They were translated into a lived cultural system that regulated bodies, shaped moral expectations, and disciplined authority. Over time, this system became so deeply embedded in the everyday life of the Black Church that it often operated invisibly, experienced not as exclusion but as “order,” not as hierarchy but as holiness.

The stained-glass ceiling stands as the institutional symbol of this cultural system of containment. Clear, luminous, and seemingly benign, it allows women to glimpse the possibility of leadership while quietly preventing them from fully inhabiting it. The ceiling is rarely enforced through explicit prohibition. Instead, it is sustained by respectability politics¹¹¹, racialized gender stereotypes¹¹², sacred architecture¹¹³, and psychological expectations that cast women's authority as conditional, provisional, or spiritually risky. This section examines how that system is constructed, reproduced, and occasionally disrupted.

From Survival Strategy to Social Orthodoxy

In the decades after emancipation, respectability emerged as a strategy for racial survival. Confronted with a dominant culture intent on portraying Black people as deviant, immoral, and dangerous, Black religious communities embraced moral discipline as a counter-narrative. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham famously described respectability politics as a “vision of racial advancement through public enactment of virtue.”¹¹⁴ Within Black churches, women's organizations, missionary societies, and auxiliaries adopted modesty, sexual restraint, temperance, and industriousness as visible signs of collective dignity. In its early form, respectability served as a form of resistance through moral performance.

Yet strategies forged under threat do not always remain flexible when the threat changes. What began as protection hardened into orthodoxy. Over time, moral rectitude became

¹¹¹ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 185.

¹¹² Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 70.

¹¹³ Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3; Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 89.

¹¹⁴ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 185.

synonymous with proper femininity, and silence with holiness.¹¹⁵ Higginbotham's warning is instructive: a politics designed to resist domination can, without vigilance, replicate the very hierarchies it seeks to oppose. In the Black Church, respectability increasingly mirrored Victorian patriarchy under the banner of racial uplift.¹¹⁶

Sermons that once denounced racial injustice gradually extended their regulatory gaze to women's bodies and comportment. Dress, hairstyle, tone of voice, emotional expression, and sexual behavior became sites of moral scrutiny. Women were not only expected to live righteously; they were also expected to look righteous, as defined and enforced by male authority. Respectability thus created a moral economy in which women's piety served as currency. Their disciplined appearance and demeanor protected the Church's public image, but at the expense of autonomy, authority, and theological agency.

The Sanctified Body: Between Purity and Erasure

Because slavery eroticized Black women's bodies, post-emancipation churches sought to reclaim dignity by suppressing expressions of female sensuality. In many Holiness and Pentecostal traditions, as Anthea Butler has shown, women's holiness was made visible through the erasure of sensuality.¹¹⁷ High collars, long sleeves, plain shoes, unadorned faces, and regulated movement became visual markers of sanctification. The holy body was the one that disappeared.

Kelly Brown Douglas argues that this dynamic produced a "dis-sanctification of desire," teaching that sexuality itself was incompatible with holiness.¹¹⁸ In exchange for spiritual

¹¹⁵ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 29.

¹¹⁶ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 187.

¹¹⁷ Anthea D. Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 54.

¹¹⁸ Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 52.

legitimacy, women were asked to surrender their erotic agency. The Church did not merely regulate behavior; it reshaped embodiment. Women became symbols of purity rather than full subjects with bodies capable of pleasure, longing, authority, and discernment.

Lee Butler describes the psychological consequence of this pattern as over-spiritualization—an attempt to escape the trauma of Black embodiment by retreating into abstraction.¹¹⁹ Yet such retreat carries a theological cost. To flee the body is to flee incarnation itself. The result is a disembodied holiness that praises women for vanishing and equates spiritual maturity with self-erasure. Within this framework, women’s bodies are not neutral vessels of ministry; they are problems to be managed. Holiness is measured by concealment and compliance rather than by justice, prophetic speech, or leadership.

Controlling Images and Ecclesial Scripts

The regulation of Black women’s authority is further sustained through what Patricia Hill Collins terms “controlling images”—racialized gender stereotypes that function as cultural scripts. In ecclesial contexts, these images are not abstract. They are enacted ritualistically, shaping how women are perceived, addressed, and allowed to act.¹²⁰

The Jezebel figure casts a shadow over sermons on modesty and purity, casting Black women’s bodies as inherently suspect and framing male desire as inevitable rather than accountable. The Mammy is sanctified as “Mother So-and-So,” beloved yet voiceless, praised for tireless service and emotional labor while denied authority or decision-making power. The

¹¹⁹ Lee H. Butler Jr., *Liberating Our Dignity, Saving Our Souls: A Womanist–Queer Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 55.

¹²⁰ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 69.

Sapphire—the angry, emasculating woman—lurks behind accusations of divisiveness, ensuring that women who challenge injustice risk being labeled unholy, unfeminine, or out of order.¹²¹

These images operate not only through language but also through embodiment. They shape posture, tone, gesture, and expectation. Over time, conformity becomes pleasurable because it promises belonging. Silence becomes humility. Exhaustion becomes service. Invisibility becomes holiness. As Collins observes, oppression is most effective when it feels voluntary. Within the Black Church, these controlling images are reinforced weekly through ritual practice, sermon rhetoric, informal correction, and congregational memory. Together, they form an embodied liturgy of subordination.

Architecture as Ideology: How Sacred Space Restricts the Sacred

The cultural system of containment becomes visible in space. Sacred architecture conveys theology through elevation, lighting, access, and movement. The pulpit is raised; the altar is set apart; the choir loft is positioned behind or beneath the preacher. Jeanne Halgren Kilde describes Protestant sanctuaries as “*machines for moral formation*,” shaping bodies for reverence and obedience. In Black churches, these architectural cues acquire additional racialized and gendered meanings.¹²²

Emilie Townes reminds us that space is moralized through ritual practice—where people stand determines who is seen as holy. The pulpit becomes a masculine stronghold of authority, while pews and choir stands—often filled primarily by women—become feminized zones of devotion without jurisdiction. Even contemporary megachurches, with glass pulpits and stage

¹²¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 72.

¹²² Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *Sacred Power, Sacred Space* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 113.

lighting, often replicate this grammar: men preach under spotlights while women support from the periphery. Architecture itself becomes theology.¹²³

The stained-glass ceiling is embedded here. Women are visible in sacred space but rarely authorized to be there. They see leadership enacted above them while remaining physically and symbolically grounded below. The ceiling allows light in but not passage through.

Composite Vignette: “Everything but the Table”¹²⁴

On the third Sunday of the month, she arrives early. The sanctuary is quiet except for the hum of the sound system and the shuffle of programs stacked at the back. She checks the communion elements—juice poured, bread cut—then straightens chairs, reviews the announcements, and confirms the choir’s order. She has written the responsive reading, coordinated the offering volunteers, and prepared the pastoral prayer.

When worship begins, her presence is everywhere. She leads the call to worship, guides the congregation in prayer, cues the musicians, and makes announcements with clarity and warmth. The congregation responds readily to her voice because they know and trust her.

When it is time for communion, she steps back.

A male associate pastor—newer, less experienced, rarely seen outside Sunday mornings—steps forward to consecrate the elements. She hands him the tray she prepared. He reads the words of institution. The congregation bows its head. She stands slightly behind him, hands folded, eyes forward.

¹²³ Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 15.

¹²⁴ This composite vignette is constructed from multiple interviews, participant observation, and the author’s field notes gathered during the course of this study. Details have been intentionally combined and anonymized to protect participants’ identities. The vignette does not represent a single individual but illustrates a recurring structural pattern observed across congregational contexts.

No one comments on the exchange. No rule has been broken. No prohibition has been spoken aloud. And yet the message is unmistakable: she may do everything that sustains worship, but she may not touch the table.

Later, someone thanks her for “helping so much.” Another says she has “such a servant’s heart.” She smiles, gathers her bag, and leaves the sanctuary, carrying the familiar ache of having led fully while being authorized only partially.

This scene, repeated in countless congregations, reveals how the stained-glass ceiling operates in practice. Authority is not denied outright; it is redirected, deferred, and distributed unevenly. Women are entrusted with the labor of ministry yet denied access to its symbols. The table becomes the line that cannot be crossed.

Liturgical Labor and Invisible Leadership

Despite formal exclusion, women perform most of the Church’s liturgical and administrative labor. They plan worship, direct choirs, manage budgets, organize youth ministries, coordinate benevolence, and provide pastoral care long before—and often more consistently than—many ordained clergy. Yet this work is routinely framed as assistance rather than as authority.

Katie Cannon names this dynamic “the moral agency of the unacknowledged,” emphasizing that everyday acts of care constitute ethical and theological practice. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes records the testimonies of women who describe themselves as “the backbone of the Church but never its face.” This paradox—being essential yet invisible—produces psychic strain. When women’s labor is treated as natural or expected, the Church participates in what Townes calls the “cultural production of evil,” rendering women’s contributions unremarkable and, therefore, unworthy of recognition.

In this sense, erasure becomes a form of spiritual violence.

Media, Modernity, and the New Performance of Piety

In the twenty-first century, digital media expanded the reach of respectability. Livestreamed worship, viral sermons, and social media platforms turned piety into public performance. For women clergy, visibility became increasingly double-edged. Moments of institutional breakthrough were often followed by intensified scrutiny of appearance, tone, and perceived femininity. Visibility promised affirmation but delivered surveillance.

At the same time, digital platforms have created virtual hush arbors. Online preaching collectives, social media networks, and digital ministries enable women to support one another, share sermons, critique patriarchy, and imagine alternative ecclesial futures. These spaces serve as contemporary sanctuaries beyond institutional control, revealing that the cultural system of containment is powerful yet not total.

The Stained-Glass Ceiling as Metaphor and Mechanism

The metaphor of the stained-glass ceiling captures the paradoxical aesthetics of exclusion. Stained glass is sacred, luminous, and admired, yet rigid and impermeable. The same beauty that inspires reverence also marks an un-crossable boundary. The ceiling is therefore not only symbolic but also material, economic, and institutional.

Empirical studies confirm this reality. Women who attain senior leadership positions are often appointed to organizations, like congregations facing financial instability or institutional decline—a phenomenon known as the “glass-cliff effect.”¹²⁵ Access is granted, but under

¹²⁵ Michelle K. Ryan and S. Alexander Haslam, “The Glass Cliff: Evidence that Women Are Over-Represented in Precarious Leadership Positions,” *British Journal of Management* 16, no. 2 (2005): 81.

precarious conditions. The ceiling does not merely block advancement; it shapes the terms of advancement.

Cracks of Light

Yet every stained-glass window has seams. Through those seams, light leaks. Womanist theology, grassroots preaching collectives, women-led congregations, and interfaith chaplaincy programs have begun to refract the ecclesial landscape. Leaders who practice what Eboni Marshall Turman calls an incarnational ethic—affirming the sacredness of Black women’s bodies and presence—model forms of authority that do not rely on patriarchal validation.

These developments do not merely resist the stained-glass ceiling; they reinterpret it. What once served only as a barrier becomes a surface—still limiting yet no longer total. Fracture becomes refraction.

The question, then, is not why Black clergywomen leave congregational ministry but how they reimagine ministry when ecclesial structures deny their full humanity. The cultural system of containment, while powerful, has also created conditions for innovation. The next section turns inward to examine how this system is metabolized psychologically and vocationally, and how the strain it produces becomes a seedbed for new forms of ministry and belonging.

Double Consciousness, Social Strain, and the Search for Liberation: Interior Life, Vocational Tension, and Womanist Innovation

The cultural system of containment described in the previous section does not end at the sanctuary door. Its effects extend inward, shaping the emotional, psychological, and vocational lives of Black clergywomen who remain deeply committed to the Church even as they are constrained by it. Over time, exclusion becomes not merely an external obstacle but an interior condition—one that structures how women understand themselves, their callings, and their relationship to God. This section examines how gendered exclusion is internalized as sacred

double consciousness, how institutional blockage produces social strain, and how Black clergywomen transform that strain into creative vocational innovation, culminating in chaplaincy as a Womanist reimagining of ministry.

Sacred Double Consciousness: Belonging and Alienation

W. E. B. Du Bois famously described double consciousness as “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others,” a psychic condition produced by living in a society that denies full recognition.¹²⁶ For Black clergywomen, this experience takes on a distinctly sacred form. They are shaped by a Church that taught them to pray, discern, preach, and love God, even as that same institution struggles to recognize their authority as legitimate, stable, or enduring. The result is a spiritual duality in which belonging and alienation coexist within the same ecclesial space.

In congregational life, this sacred double consciousness manifests as spiritual dissonance. A woman may be publicly celebrated as evidence of the Church’s progress while privately treated as an exception whose authority remains provisional. She may be invited to preach but discouraged from presiding at the table; affirmed for her gifts yet cautioned not to “overstep.” Each act of ministry becomes an act of translation—rendering her calling intelligible within a patriarchal grammar never designed to receive it. Howard Thurman described this condition as “the disquiet of divided loyalty,” the ache that arises when obedience to God collides with fidelity to inherited tradition.¹²⁷ The result is not disbelief but weariness: a soul stretched between revelation and rejection.

¹²⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903), 3.

¹²⁷ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949), 11.

The Double Bind of Faith and Identity

Psychological scholarship helps clarify the cost of this condition. When a primary community becomes a source of harm, individuals experience what psychologists call identity-based trauma. For Black clergywomen, the injury is intensified because it is mediated through the sacred. Beverly Greene names this experience “the double bind of faith and identity,” capturing the emotional burden of remaining devoted to a religious institution that denies full personhood.¹²⁸

The harm is intimate rather than abstract. The Church that nurtured a woman’s calling becomes the place where that calling is delayed, questioned, or diminished. Many clergywomen describe the resulting pain not as anger but as exhaustion—a chronic depletion from the emotional labor of managing patriarchal expectations while remaining spiritually faithful. Loyalty becomes both devotion and vulnerability. As one minister reflected in an interview, “I am faithful twice—once to God, and once to the fear of proving them right.”¹²⁹ Such statements reveal a profound ontological tension: the call is certain, but the institution is not. The psyche becomes a contested space where divine affirmation and institutional refusal coexist.

Over time, this double bind breeds vocational ambivalence. Staying becomes costly, while leaving feels like betrayal—not only of an institution but also of one’s spiritual formation and communal identity. The result is rarely rupture; it is endurance under strain.

¹²⁸ Beverly Greene, “African American Women,” in *Women of Color: Integrating Ethnic and Gender Identities in Psychotherapy*, ed. Lillian Comas-Díaz and Beverly Greene (New York: Guilford Press, 1994), 10.

¹²⁹ Interview with Black clergywoman (pseudonym “Rev. A.M.”), higher education chaplaincy, conducted by the author, March 2023.

Composite Vignette: “The Slow Knowing”¹³⁰

She does not decide all at once. There is no dramatic exit, no moment of righteous fury. Instead, the knowing comes slowly.

It begins with her body. A tightness in her chest during meetings. A heaviness when she walks into spaces where her voice is “welcomed” but never decisive. She notices how often she rehearses her words before speaking and how carefully she monitors her tone and posture. She realizes she has begun to dream of ministry elsewhere—not as an escape, but as rest.

She waits. She prays. She tells herself that patience is a form of faith.

Years pass. Younger men are ordained. Committees change names but not patterns. She is often thanked, deeply trusted, and partially authorized.

One evening, driving home after leading yet another service she did not preside over, she says aloud, almost without thinking: “This church will never change.” The words land with grief, not anger. What hurts is not the loss of position but the recognition that the space that formed her cannot hold her whole self.

This moment—quiet, embodied, and irreversible—marks a turning point. It is not a rejection of the Church but a reorientation toward life. The question shifts from How do I stay? to Where can I breathe?

This slow knowing is not failure. It is discernment forged in strain.

¹³⁰ This composite vignette is constructed from recurring themes, embodied experiences, and narrative patterns drawn from the author’s autoethnographic reflection and from interviews with Black clergywomen in higher education chaplaincy. It does not represent a single individual but synthesizes shared vocational, emotional, and theological realities in order to protect participant anonymity while conveying experiential truth. See Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (2011).

Social Strain and the Logic of Adaptation

Robert K. Merton's Social Strain Theory provides a sociological framework for interpreting this turning point. Merton argues that when institutional structures limit access to culturally valued goals, individuals develop patterned responses to manage the resulting strain. Within the Black Church, the culturally valued goal is full vocational expression—the freedom to respond to God's call with authenticity, authority, and sustainability. Yet women frequently encounter blocked pathways to that goal: restricted ordination processes, limited access to pulpits, informal norms that make leadership provisional, and expectations that spiritual authority be mediated through male oversight.

Black clergywomen respond to this strain in multiple ways. Some remain within patriarchal structures, pursuing reform through patience, persistence, and institutional diplomacy. Others engage in ritualism, continuing ministry while relinquishing expectations of structural change. Still others retreat from formal ecclesial life altogether, cultivating spiritual practice outside denominational frameworks. Some adopt openly resistant or rebellious postures, constructing feminist, Womanist, queer, or interfaith theologies that reject inherited norms.

Yet one response appears with particular frequency and significance: innovation. Rather than abandoning ministry, many Black clergywomen reimagine it. They found independent fellowships, counseling practices, justice-centered nonprofits, or digital ministries, or enter chaplaincy as a space where their authority is not immediately constrained by patriarchal ecclesiology. Womanist theology has long named this pattern “making a way out of no way”—a creative refusal to interpret institutional blockage as divine negation.

Chaplaincy as Liminal, Embodied, and Innovative, Ministry

Among these innovative pathways, chaplaincy—particularly in higher education—emerges as a uniquely liberative vocational site. Chaplaincy is a liminal form of ministry, situated at the threshold between religious tradition and public life.¹³¹ It is neither fully inside nor fully outside ecclesial structures. It does not rely on pulpit authority, ordination politics, or denominational hierarchy. Instead, it locates authority in presence, ethical attentiveness, and relational trust.

Winnifred Fallers Sullivan describes chaplains as “ministers of presence who traverse the blurred border between religion and the public sphere.”¹³² Their work is defined less by doctrinal enforcement than by accompaniment across differences. For Black clergywomen, this liminality resonates deeply. Having long navigated contested ecclesial spaces, they bring to chaplaincy a vocational fluency forged in struggle—the ability to listen across traditions, to speak truth without coercion, and to create sanctuary in spaces not originally designed for them.

AnneMarie Mingo’s account of Black women’s faith practices demonstrates how sacred space can be created through embodied presence, helping to clarify what chaplaincy becomes in their hands.¹³³ It functions as a contemporary, mobile hush harbor—a home-place carried through care, justice, and embodied wisdom rather than confined to a fixed architectural space.

Chaplaincy also reconfigures the meaning of religious authority. Traditional ecclesiology often locates authority in office, ordination, and hierarchical position. Womanist theology, by contrast, locates authority in justice-oriented relationships, embodied truth-telling, and the

¹³¹ Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *A Ministry of Presence: Chaplaincy, Spiritual Care, and the Law* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 1.

¹³² Sullivan, *A Ministry of Presence*, 23.

¹³³ AnneMarie Mingo, *Have You Got Good Religion? Black Women’s Faith, Courage, and Moral Leadership in the Civil Rights Movement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 121.

capacity to nurture wholeness.¹³⁴ Chaplaincy aligns naturally with this Womanist account. The chaplain's authority does not derive from elevation or title but from ethical credibility cultivated through sustained presence.

Within universities—often shaped by rationalism, competition, and performance—Black women chaplains serve as counter-witnesses.¹³⁵ They insist that spirituality, culture, and justice are inseparable. Their ministries address the spiritual toll of racism, the emotional weight of exclusion, and the moral urgency of belonging. Leadership shifts from proclamation to accompaniment and from hierarchy to relational courage.

If the traditional Black Church has disciplined women's bodies into silence, chaplaincy invites those bodies back into speech. To sit with a grieving student, accompany a survivor of violence, and bless a first-generation graduate—these embodied acts are sacraments that call for presence, attunement, and courage. Eboni Marshall Turman's Womanist ethic of incarnation affirms the theological significance of embodied life.¹³⁶ Chaplaincy becomes a site where Black women reclaim the sacredness of their embodiment.

This reclamation carries ancestral resonance. In the hush harbor, sacred knowledge was transmitted through rhythm, gesture, breath, and communal presence. Chaplaincy reactivates that lineage, translating ancestral practices into contemporary forms of care: listening, silence, touch, and shared breath.¹³⁷ In this sense, chaplaincy extends the Church's earliest liberatory practices while rejecting many patriarchal constraints that emerged later.

¹³⁴ Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 95; Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 161.

¹³⁵ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 13.

¹³⁶ Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1.

¹³⁷ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 212.

The vocational innovations of Black clergywomen do more than respond to exclusion; they generate new theological knowledge. Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography captures this dynamic by treating lived experience as data and reflection as theory. Stacey Floyd-Thomas's Womanist ethical method demonstrates that survival can become a source of ethical imagination.¹³⁸ In chaplaincy, survival becomes the seedbed for creative ministry. Practices developed under strain—holistic care, interfaith fluency, and trauma-informed accompaniment—flow back into churches, academics, and communities, reshaping theology itself.

Innovation thus becomes a theological method. It is the disciplined practice of reimagining what ministry can be when institutions fail to fully envision women's roles.

Liberation begins within. The double consciousness that once fractured identity can become what Du Bois called "second sight"—a capacity to perceive possibilities invisible to dominant frameworks.¹³⁹ For Black clergywomen, this second sight discerns the sacred beneath bureaucracy, the Spirit within secular institutions, and vocation beyond inherited limits. Womanist commitments to self-care, rest, and healing reinforce this interior liberation. Audre Lorde's declaration that self-care is an act of political warfare becomes theological praxis.¹⁴⁰ Rest resists the martyrdom ethos that has long consumed Black women's labor. Wholeness replaces endurance as the measure of vocation.

As innovators connect through chaplaincy cohorts, Womanist gatherings, conferences, and digital collectives, personal strain becomes communal strategy. These spaces function as contemporary ring shouts—circles of affirmation where women raise their voices without hierarchy and share vocational wisdom without fear. Howard Thurman described "the sound of

¹³⁸ Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, 3.

¹³⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903), 3.

¹⁴⁰ Audre Lorde, "A Burst of Light," in *A Burst of Light: Essays* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988), 131.

the genuine” as the deepest truth within the human spirit.¹⁴¹ In these communities, that sound resonates, and women learn to trust what institutions have long doubted. Solidarity becomes its own form of liberation, countering isolation and enabling sustained creativity.

Toward a Theology of Wholeness

The aim of this vocational evolution is not merely inclusion within institutions but wholeness within the self. Womanist theology defines salvation not as escape from the body or the world but as the restoration of right relationship—with God, with community, and with one’s embodied self.¹⁴² For Black clergywomen, wholeness emerges when calling and context align—not through institutional permission but through vocational integrity.

This movement fulfills Du Bois’s hope that the “two warring ideals” might merge into “a better and truer self.”¹⁴³ In the ministries of Black chaplains, this unification is already evident. Their work embodies an incarnational gospel—God with us, God in us, God through us.

Conclusion: From Containment to Home-Place

This chapter has traced the historical, theological, cultural, and psychological terrain through which Black clergywomen discern and embody their callings. Beginning in the hush harbors of enslavement and moving through Reconstruction, urbanization, the Civil Rights struggle, and contemporary ecclesial life, the Black Church has emerged as a profoundly paradoxical institution—one that nurtured Black survival, resistance, and communal identity while simultaneously reproducing patriarchal structures that constrained Black women’s spiritual authority. These contradictions are not incidental. They are historically co-produced, theologically justified, culturally enforced, and internally absorbed.

¹⁴¹ Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 37.

¹⁴² Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 142; Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 65.

¹⁴³ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 3.

The Black Church's role as a home-place has never been simple. From its earliest emergence, sacred space was forged under threat, sustained through improvisation, and shaped by embodied knowledge. Yet as the Church became institutionalized, authority hardened into hierarchy. Theologized patriarchy entered through interpretation, colonial God-images, and ecclesial theologies of order. These inheritances were then translated into cultural systems of containment—respectability politics, controlling images, sacred architecture, and moral surveillance—that rendered Black women's leadership visible yet perpetually provisional. Over time, exclusion ceased to appear as exclusion at all; it came to feel like holiness.

For Black clergywomen, these dynamics are not merely external. They become internalized as a sacred double consciousness and a vocational strain. Loving the Church that formed them, women learn to navigate belonging and alienation. Their faithfulness is tested not by doubt in God but by sustained institutional refusal. What emerges is not a simple departure or rebellion but discernment under pressure—a slow reckoning with the limits of spaces that can no longer hold them whole.

Yet this chapter has also shown that constraint has never been the final word. Black clergywomen have continually transformed exclusion into innovation. Drawing on ancestral epistemologies rooted in survival, relational authority, and sacred world-making, they have reimagined ministry beyond inherited ecclesial boundaries. Chaplaincy—particularly within higher education—emerges here not as a retreat from the Black Church's liberatory legacy but as its Womanist continuation. As a liminal vocation grounded in presence rather than position, chaplaincy allows Black clergywomen to exercise authority without apology, minister without shrinking, and create home-place without patriarchal gatekeeping.

Seen through Womanist eyes, the stained-glass ceiling becomes more than a barrier; it becomes a surface upon which history's fractures refract into new forms of revelation. What was designed to contain becomes the condition through which light enters. Black clergywomen do not wait for ceilings to fall. They learn to walk on light—to carry sacred space with them, build sanctuary wherever their feet stand, and practice an ecclesiology rooted in justice, embodiment, and care.

What emerges, finally, is not merely resilience but revelation. This chapter argues that the movement of Black clergywomen into chaplaincy is a Womanist ecclesial innovation—one that preserves the Black Church's liberatory DNA, rejects its patriarchal constraints, and provides Black clergywomen with a vocational homeplace where calling, body, and authority can remain intact.

To make sense of this movement with analytical precision, the dissertation now turns to a set of theoretical frameworks that can name these elements together: structure, power, space, embodiment, and adaptation. Chapter Two develops this interdisciplinary architecture by drawing on Womanist theology, Black Feminist Thought, bell hooks' theory of domination and home-place, intersectionality, Critical Race Theory, Social Strain Theory, and Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography. Taken together, these frameworks provide the conceptual tools to interpret Black clergywomen's vocational journeys not as individual detours but as patterned, meaning-making responses to systemic exclusion—and as sites of ongoing theological creativity.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Foundations and Intellectual Genealogies

Womanist Theology as Normative and Epistemological Ground

Womanist theology provides the ethical and epistemological foundation for this dissertation's interpretation of Black clergywomen's vocational lives. Emerging from the intellectual, theological, and social witness of Black women, Womanist theology insists that lived experience—particularly experience forged under conditions of racialized and gendered constraint—is not merely illustrative of theological claims but constitutive of theological knowledge itself.¹⁴⁴ Within this framework, vocation is not assessed primarily through institutional recognition or formal authority, but through ethical coherence, embodied discernment, and the pursuit of communal and personal wholeness.

Genealogical Foundations of Womanist Theology

Womanist theology emerged in the late twentieth century as both critique and constructive intervention within Black theology and feminist theology, fields that often failed to account adequately for the particular realities of Black women's lives. While Black theology foregrounded racial liberation and feminist theology centered gendered oppression, neither consistently addressed the interlocking dynamics of race, gender, class, embodiment, and survival that shape Black women's theological worlds.¹⁴⁵

Early Womanist thinkers—including Alice Walker, whose articulation of “Womanist” provided the term's initial cultural grounding—named Black women's creativity, resilience, and moral clarity as sources of wisdom. Subsequent Womanist theologians such as Jacquelyn Grant,

¹⁴⁴ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi.

¹⁴⁵ Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 198.

Katie Cannon, Delores Williams, and Emilie Townes¹⁴⁶ extended this insight into sustained theological critique, challenging both androcentric and Eurocentric assumptions about doctrine, ethics, and authority.

Central to this tradition is the insistence that theology must be accountable to the concrete conditions of Black women's lives. Womanist theology does not begin with abstraction and apply theory to experience; it begins with experience and interrogates the theological frameworks that have rendered that experience invisible, expendable, or theologically unintelligible.¹⁴⁷ This epistemological orientation is essential for a study concerned with vocational discernment under conditions of institutional exclusion.

Womanist Epistemology: Knowledge Rooted in Lived Experience

As an epistemology, Womanist theology challenges dominant theological assumptions about objectivity, authority, and abstraction. It rejects the premise that theological knowledge emerges primarily from disembodied reflection, hierarchical credentialing, or institutional sanction. Instead, it insists that theology is forged through lived struggle, relational accountability, and embodied discernment—especially among those excluded from formal sites of religious authority.¹⁴⁸

This epistemological stance is particularly significant for Black clergywomen, whose theological insight has often been discounted precisely because it emerges from embodied ministry rather than sanctioned leadership roles. Womanist theology affirms that the capacity to interpret God's activity in the world is not contingent upon ordination status, pulpit access, or

¹⁴⁶ Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*; Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*; Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*; Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*.

¹⁴⁷ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 5.

¹⁴⁸ Katie G. Cannon, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness," in *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (New York: Continuum, 1995), 30.

institutional approval. Rather, it is cultivated through practices of care, survival, resistance, and ethical reflection within constrained contexts.¹⁴⁹

By centering lived experience as a legitimate site of theological knowledge, Womanist theology authorizes Black clergywomen to name the moral and spiritual dimensions of their vocational lives without deferring to institutions that have historically limited their participation. This authorization is not merely descriptive; it is normative. It establishes criteria for evaluating vocation that foreground integrity, sustainability, and relational responsibility over endurance within harmful systems.¹⁵⁰

Ethical Commitments: Wholeness, Survival, and Flourishing

Womanist theology is fundamentally ethical in orientation. It refuses theological frameworks that sacralize suffering or interpret Black women's endurance as evidence of divine favor. Instead, it insists that survival, joy, and flourishing are legitimate theological goods. Katie Cannon's articulation of Black women's moral wisdom as arising from concrete ethical dilemmas underscores this commitment: moral clarity is forged not through abstract principle alone, but through navigating lives shaped by constraint and responsibility.¹⁵¹

Within this ethical framework, vocation cannot be evaluated solely by institutional continuity or sacrificial endurance. A vocational path that consistently erodes bodily health, spiritual integrity, or moral agency cannot be presumed faithful simply because it aligns with inherited ecclesial norms. Womanist theology therefore provides a critical lens through which to interrogate religious narratives that equate faithfulness with staying, submission, or silent suffering.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 17.

¹⁵⁰ Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 47.

¹⁵¹ Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 67.

¹⁵² Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 161.

This ethical orientation is crucial for interpreting Black clergywomen's vocational movement. Decisions to leave, reconfigure, or reimagine ministry are not read as failures of commitment but as moral responses to conditions that threaten wholeness. Womanist theology authorizes discernment that prioritizes life over loyalty to institutions that cannot or will not sustain it.¹⁵³

Womanist Theology and Vocation Under Constraint

Within this study, Womanist theology functions as the normative anchor against which all vocational outcomes are evaluated. It establishes that vocation is not reducible to institutional placement or ecclesial recognition, but is instead an ethical practice shaped by responsibility to self, community, and God. This understanding allows the dissertation to interpret vocational movement not as abandonment of calling, but as fidelity to it under changing conditions.

By foregrounding embodied wisdom, ethical clarity, and communal accountability, Womanist theology provides the moral grammar necessary to assess vocational innovation. It insists that Black clergywomen are not merely reacting to exclusion but engaging in discernment rooted in deep theological reflection. Their movement toward contexts such as higher education chaplaincy is thus understood not as compromise, but as an effort to inhabit vocation with integrity, sustainability, and truth.

In this way, Womanist theology does not merely inform the analysis that follows; it disciplines it. It ensures that questions of power, space, and adaptation are never separated from ethical evaluation. It establishes flourishing—not mere survival—as the measure of vocational

¹⁵³ Emilie M. Townes, "Ethics as an Art of Doing the Work Our Souls Must Have," in *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope*, ed. Monica A. Coleman (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 23.

faithfulness and positions Black clergywomen as authoritative interpreters of their own vocational lives.

Critical Race Theory and the Structural Production of Vocational Constraint

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides the structural analytic lens necessary to interpret Black clergywomen's vocational experiences as patterned outcomes of institutional power rather than as isolated incidents or individual failures. Where Womanist theology establishes the ethical criteria by which vocation is evaluated, CRT clarifies how institutions—despite professed commitments to equity and inclusion—reproduce racialized and gendered hierarchies that constrain authority, recognition, and advancement. Within this dissertation, CRT functions as a discipline that renders visible the mechanisms through which vocational strain is generated and sustained.¹⁵⁴

Genealogical Orientation and Core Commitments

Critical Race Theory emerged in the late twentieth century through the work of legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado, who sought to explain why racial inequality persisted despite the formal dismantling of segregation and the expansion of civil rights law.¹⁵⁵ Rejecting the assumption that law and institutions operate neutrally, CRT foregrounds the role of power, history, and normativity in shaping outcomes. Racism, within this framework, is understood not as aberrational but as ordinary—embedded within institutional practices, professional standards, and cultural expectations.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (New York: NYU Press, 2017), 3.

¹⁵⁵ Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw et al., eds., *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement* (New York: New Press, 1995), xiii.

¹⁵⁶ Derrick A. Bell Jr., *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 12.

This orientation is especially relevant for analyzing religious and academic institutions, which often understand themselves as morally progressive or justice-oriented. CRT clarifies that institutional self-description does not necessarily correspond to lived experience. Exclusion frequently operates through ostensibly neutral norms—professional comportment, leadership style, credentialing pathways, or expectations of “fit”—that disproportionately disadvantage those who do not conform to dominant racial and gendered ideals.¹⁵⁷

For Black clergywomen, these dynamics manifest not only in overt denial of opportunity but in more subtle forms of conditional inclusion: affirmation without authority, access without legitimacy, and labor without decision-making power. CRT provides the conceptual tools to interpret these patterns as structural rather than accidental.¹⁵⁸

Structural Power, Normativity, and Conditional Inclusion

A central contribution of CRT is its attention to normativity—the ways institutions define what is professional, credible, or authoritative. These norms are rarely explicit, yet they exert powerful regulatory force. Leadership is often imagined through masculinized and white-coded expectations, while care work and relational labor—domains in which Black clergywomen are frequently overrepresented—are devalued or rendered invisible.

Within ecclesial contexts, this normativity may appear in assumptions about preaching style, theological voice, or pastoral authority. In academic and chaplaincy settings, it may surface through expectations about neutrality, emotional regulation, or administrative demeanor. CRT

¹⁵⁷ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, 5th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 28.

¹⁵⁸ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 69.

allows this study to analyze how such norms function as gatekeeping mechanisms that shape vocational possibility without requiring explicit exclusion.

Importantly, CRT shifts the analytic focus away from intent. Institutional harm does not require malicious actors. It is produced through systems that reward conformity to dominant norms while penalizing difference. This insight is critical for resisting narratives that attribute Black clergywomen's vocational marginalization to interpersonal conflict or individual deficiency.

Interest Convergence and the Limits of Reform

CRT's concept of interest convergence is particularly useful for interpreting institutional reform efforts within religious and academic settings. Interest convergence clarifies why progress toward equity often proves uneven and fragile. Reforms tend to advance when they align with dominant institutional interests—such as reputation management, growth, donor appeal, or public accountability—rather than from sustained commitments to justice.¹⁵⁹

Within ecclesial institutions, this dynamic may appear in symbolic inclusion initiatives that expand visibility without altering decision-making structures. In higher education, diversity commitments may flourish rhetorically while remaining constrained by financial priorities, risk management, or governance norms. CRT helps explain why Black clergywomen are often invited to contribute labor, representation, or affective care without receiving commensurate authority or security.

This framework also illuminates why promises of institutional change frequently fail to materialize. Reform is not necessarily abandoned; it is subordinated to competing interests. Over

¹⁵⁹ Derrick A. Bell Jr., "Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma," *Harvard Law Review* 93, no. 3 (1980): 523.

time, this produces vocational strain not through dramatic rupture but through repeated deferral and partial accommodation.

Intersectionality and the Compounding of Constraint

Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality further sharpens the analysis by attending to how race and gender operate simultaneously rather than additively. Black clergywomen do not experience racial exclusion and gender exclusion separately; these forces intersect to produce forms of marginalization that cannot be addressed through single-axis frameworks.¹⁶⁰

Intersectionality explains why policies or practices designed to address "women's leadership" may disproportionately benefit white women, while initiatives aimed at racial inclusion may privilege men. Black clergywomen often fall through these analytic and institutional gaps, rendered hypervisible as symbols yet structurally unsupported as leaders.¹⁶¹

By incorporating intersectionality, this dissertation resists flattening vocational experience into generic categories. It allows for an analysis attentive to how compounded exclusions shape not only access to roles but the quality, sustainability, and authority of vocational life.

Structural Strain as a Vocational Condition

CRT's emphasis on systemic reproduction of inequality clarifies why vocational strain is chronic rather than episodic for Black clergywomen. Strain accumulates through repeated experiences of partial authorization, heightened scrutiny, and constrained legitimacy. These

¹⁶⁰ Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1: 139.

¹⁶¹ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 151.

conditions are not resolved through individual resilience or improved communication; they are produced by institutional arrangements that remain fundamentally unchanged.

This structural understanding is essential for interpreting vocational movement. Without it, departures from traditional ecclesial pathways might be misread as personal dissatisfaction or professional redirection. CRT situates such movement within a broader pattern of institutional failure to sustain Black women's leadership, thereby preparing the analytic ground for Social Strain Theory's account of vocational adaptation.¹⁶²

CRT as Analytic Discipline, Not Total Explanation

Within this dissertation, CRT functions as an analytic discipline rather than a totalizing explanation. It names power, normativity, and institutional reproduction, but it does not adjudicate questions of ethical faithfulness or vocational meaning. Those interpretive tasks are taken up by Womanist theology and home-place theory.

This disciplined use of CRT prevents the analysis from collapsing into institutional critique alone. Structural clarity is paired with ethical evaluation and embodied interpretation, ensuring that vocational movement is understood not only as response to power, but as discernment exercised within it.

Preparing the Integrated Framework

By situating Black clergywomen's vocational lives within a structural analysis of power, normativity, and institutional reproduction, this section establishes the conditions under which vocational constraint becomes intelligible. CRT explains why exclusion persists even in justice-oriented institutions and why reform so often stalls at the level of representation.

¹⁶² Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1245.

The following section extends this analysis into the spatial and embodied dimensions of vocational life. While CRT names how institutions constrain authority, bell hooks' home-place theory clarifies how those constraints are lived in the body and resisted through the creation of spaces of restoration, belonging, and care.

bell hooks' Home-Place Theory and the Spatial Politics of Vocation

While Womanist theology provides the ethical grounding for evaluating vocation and Critical Race Theory names the structural conditions that constrain it, bell hooks' concept of *home-place* introduces a crucial spatial and embodied dimension. Home-place theory illuminates how power is lived in space, how belonging is cultivated under conditions of exclusion, and why the creation of restorative environments becomes a vocational necessity rather than a personal preference. For Black clergywomen navigating institutions that simultaneously invite their labor and constrain their authority, home-place theory clarifies how vocation is experienced not only as role or calling, but as inhabitation.¹⁶³

Genealogy of Home-Place Theory

bell hooks developed the concept of home-place within Black feminist thought to describe spaces—often created by Black women—that function as sites of resistance, restoration, and affirmation in the face of racialized domination.¹⁶⁴ In *Yearning* and *Belonging*, hooks identified home-place as a counter-site to a hostile world: a space where Black people could recover dignity, cultivate self-regard, and resist the internalization of dehumanizing narratives.

Importantly, home-place is not defined by nostalgia or domestic idealization. It is a political and ethical practice forged under constraint.¹⁶⁵ Home-place emerges because dominant

¹⁶³ hooks, *Yearning*, 41.

¹⁶⁴ hooks, *Belonging*, 213.

¹⁶⁵ hooks, *Yearning*, 42.

spaces are unsafe, extractive, or surveilled. It is sustained through intentional labor—often feminized and undervalued—that creates conditions for psychological and spiritual survival.

Within this dissertation, home-place theory is extended beyond its original domestic and communal framing to analyze vocational and institutional contexts.¹⁶⁶ This extension is not metaphorical but analytic. Higher education chaplaincy, as examined here, can function as a home-place when it enables Black clergywomen to inhabit vocation with dignity, authority, and embodied ease.

Space as Site of Power

Home-place theory shifts analytic attention from abstract inclusion to spatial experience. Institutions may be formally open while remaining inhospitable. Presence does not guarantee belonging. Black clergywomen may occupy leadership roles yet experience constant self-monitoring, heightened scrutiny, or pressure to perform care without authority. These dynamics are spatial as well as structural.

Through a home-place lens, such experiences are not reduced to interpersonal discomfort or individual sensitivity. They are understood as effects of power that operate through space: who is watched, who is trusted, who is allowed ease, and who must remain vigilant. Space communicates expectations long before they are articulated.

This spatial analysis complements CRT's structural critique by showing how institutional norms are felt in the body. Home-place theory explains why vocational misalignment is often registered somatically—through fatigue, constriction, or chronic tension—before it is cognitively named.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ bell hooks, *Belonging*, 221.

¹⁶⁷ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 30.

Embodiment and the Experience of Belonging

A central insight of home-place theory is that belonging is embodied. It is experienced through sensations of safety, rest, and coherence, not merely through formal recognition. For Black clergywomen, whose bodies are often sites of projection, discipline, or expectation, this insight is particularly significant.

In institutional spaces that do not function as home-place, the body remains alert. Speech is measured. Affect is regulated. Identity is fragmented to maintain acceptability. Over time, these conditions exact a cost that is not only emotional but vocational and theological. Ministry becomes extractive rather than generative.

Home-place theory legitimizes bodily response as analytic data. The absence of ease is not a personal failure of resilience; it is evidence of spatial harm. Conversely, moments of bodily grounding or relational spaciousness are not incidental comforts; they are indicators of alignment and possibility.¹⁶⁸

Home-Place and Vocational Discernment

Within this study, home-place theory reframes vocational discernment as a spatial and embodied practice. Decisions about staying, leaving, or reconfiguring ministry are not made solely through rational calculation or doctrinal reflection. They emerge through accumulated bodily knowledge—what this dissertation names as *slow knowing*.¹⁶⁹

Slow knowing refers to the gradual recognition, often resisted or deferred, that a space cannot sustain one's calling without continued self-erasure. Home-place theory clarifies why this

¹⁶⁸ hooks, *Yearning*, 49.

¹⁶⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 203.

recognition takes time: attachment, hope for reform, and ethical commitment often delay departure even as the body registers misalignment.

This framework resists narratives that frame vocational movement as impulsive or reactive. Instead, it interprets such movement as the culmination of sustained discernment shaped by repeated spatial encounters. Leaving a non-home-place is not abandonment of vocation; it is refusal of ongoing harm.¹⁷⁰

Chaplaincy as a Potential Home-Place

Home-place theory also helps explain why higher education chaplaincy emerges as a significant vocational site for Black clergywomen. Chaplaincy often allows for greater relational authority, flexibility in leadership expression, and intentional cultivation of space. While not immune to institutional constraint, chaplaincy can provide conditions under which Black clergywomen are less surveilled, less fragmented, and more fully authorized to inhabit their vocational identities.

This does not imply that chaplaincy is inherently liberatory or uniformly experienced as home-place. Rather, home-place theory allows the analysis to ask under what conditions chaplaincy becomes sustaining and for whom. It resists idealization while preserving analytic clarity.

Home-Place in the Integrated Framework

Within the integrated framework of this chapter, home-place theory performs several critical functions. It translates structural power into lived experience, making visible how institutions shape bodies as well as roles. It bridges Womanist ethics and CRT by showing how

¹⁷⁰ Audre Lorde, “A Burst of Light,” in *A Burst of Light: Essays* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988), 131.

moral injury and institutional exclusion are spatially enacted. It also prepares the analytic ground for Social Strain Theory by clarifying why sustained inhabitation of non-home-places becomes untenable over time.

By centering space and embodiment, home-place theory ensures that vocational analysis remains attentive not only to what Black clergywomen are permitted to do, but to how they are allowed to be. This attention is essential for understanding vocation as lived practice rather than abstract calling.

Transition to Social Strain Theory

If home-place theory explains how vocational harm and restoration are experienced in the body and in space, Social Strain Theory explains why vocational reconfiguration becomes a patterned response to such conditions. The next section builds on this spatial analysis to examine how Black clergywomen adapt their vocational pathways in response to persistent institutional blockage, framing chaplaincy not as retreat but as innovation under constraint.

Social Strain Theory and Vocational Innovation Under Constraint

While Womanist theology establishes the ethical criteria for evaluating vocation and bell hooks' home-place theory illuminates the embodied and spatial experience of belonging, Robert K. Merton's Social Strain Theory provides a sociological framework for understanding *why* Black clergywomen so often reconfigure their vocational pathways rather than remain within traditional ecclesial hierarchies. Social Strain Theory allows this dissertation to interpret vocational movement not as individual failure, burnout, or loss of faith, but as a patterned response to persistent institutional blockage.¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ Robert K. Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," *American Sociological Review* 3, no. 5 (1938): 672.

Social Strain Theory: Goals, Means, and Institutional Blockage

Merton developed Social Strain Theory to explain how individuals and groups respond when culturally valued goals are widely promoted while access to the legitimate means of achieving those goals is unevenly distributed. Strain emerges from the tension between aspiration and opportunity.¹⁷² Crucially, Merton did not frame strain as a psychological deficit or moral weakness. It is a predictable outcome of institutional arrangements that privilege certain pathways while constraining others.

This framework is particularly useful for analyzing vocational life within religious institutions. Ministry, leadership, service, and calling are consistently affirmed as moral and theological goods. Yet access to authority—ordination, sacramental leadership, senior roles, or decision-making power—is often structured along racialized and gendered lines. The goal of ministry is affirmed, while the means of exercising it fully remain restricted.¹⁷³

For Black clergywomen, this misalignment is not episodic but sustained. Social Strain Theory names this condition as structural rather than personal.

Patterned Responses to Strain

Merton identified several patterned responses to strain: conformity, ritualism, retreatism, rebellion, and innovation. Each represents a different strategy for negotiating the gap between culturally valued goals and restricted institutional means.

This dissertation centers innovation—the response in which individuals remain committed to the goal while reconfiguring the means of pursuing it.¹⁷⁴ Innovation does not abandon vocation; it alters the institutional route through which vocation is enacted.

¹⁷² Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: Free Press, 1968), 185.

¹⁷³ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 116.

¹⁷⁴ Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 195.

This distinction is critical. Without a strain-based analysis, Black clergywomen's movement away from traditional ecclesial roles might be misread as retreat (withdrawal from ministry), rebellion (rejection of religious authority), or burnout (psychological exhaustion). Social Strain Theory clarifies that higher education chaplaincy represents none of these. It constitutes vocational innovation: a reimagining of ministry that preserves theological commitment while bypassing blocked institutional pathways.¹⁷⁵

Innovation as Faithful Adaptation

Innovation, as understood here, is not a failure of faith but an expression of it. Black clergywomen who move into chaplaincy do not relinquish the goals of ministry, care, leadership, or justice. They reject institutional arrangements that consistently prevent those goals from being pursued with integrity and sustainability.

Strain theory reframes vocational movement as intelligible, patterned, and rational, rather than anomalous or idiosyncratic. It shifts analytic attention away from individual resilience narratives and toward the institutional opportunity structures that shape vocational possibility.

Importantly, this framework resists psychologizing vocational change. Rather than attributing departure to personal dissatisfaction or diminished commitment, strain theory situates adaptation within repeated experiences of denial, partial authorization, and deferred legitimacy. When institutions consistently block viable pathways to leadership, innovation becomes not only understandable but necessary.

Accumulation, Temporality, and “Slow Knowing”

Social Strain Theory also illuminates the temporal dimension of vocational movement. Strain accumulates over time. It is rarely experienced as a single crisis or rupture.¹⁷⁶ Instead, it

¹⁷⁵ Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Free Press, 1963), 9.

¹⁷⁶ Charles Tilly, *Durable Inequality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 82.

emerges through repeated moments of constraint—missed opportunities, symbolic inclusion without authority, promises of change that never materialize.

This temporal analysis aligns closely with the dissertation’s emphasis on slow knowing as a mode of ethical clarity.¹⁷⁷ Vocational reconfiguration is not impulsive. It is the outcome of sustained discernment under constraint, in which ethical clarity develops gradually as institutional conditions fail to change. Innovation thus represents the culmination of long-term engagement rather than withdrawal from responsibility.

Innovation Without Idealization

While Social Strain Theory clarifies why vocational innovation occurs, it also guards against romanticizing adaptation. Innovation does not eliminate strain; it redistributes it. Higher education chaplaincy introduces new constraints, including institutional precarity, political pressures, and the emotional labor of navigating pluralistic environments.

This nuance is essential. Chaplaincy is not theorized here as a utopian alternative to ecclesial life. Rather, it is understood as a context in which strain is reconfigured in ways that may allow for greater coherence between ethical commitments, embodied well-being, and exercised authority.¹⁷⁸

Strain theory enables this dissertation to affirm chaplaincy as a meaningful vocational adaptation without idealizing it as resolution.

¹⁷⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72.

¹⁷⁸ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 96.

Strain, Agency, and Womanist Ethics

Social Strain Theory does not collapse agency into structural determinism. Innovation is a choice—one shaped by constraint but exercised through discernment, imagination, and moral courage. This emphasis on agency aligns closely with Womanist theology's insistence on Black women's ethical authority and spiritual wisdom.

Within the integrated framework of this chapter, strain theory provides the structural explanation for vocational movement, while Womanist theology interprets its ethical meaning. Together, they allow the analysis to hold constraint and creativity within the same frame.

Chaplaincy as Patterned Innovation

Higher education chaplaincy emerges, within this strain framework, as a patterned site of vocational innovation rather than an exceptional career detour. Universities occupy a complex institutional position: formally secular yet invested in moral formation, community care, and spiritual life. Chaplaincy roles often emphasize relational authority, pastoral competence, and ethical presence over sacramental gatekeeping or rigid hierarchy.

For Black clergywomen whose gifts are repeatedly affirmed but structurally constrained in ecclesial settings, these features make chaplaincy an intelligible site of adaptation. Strain theory clarifies why such movement recurs across narratives rather than appearing as isolated choice.

Function Within the Chapter's Analytic Architecture

Within the architecture of Chapter Two, Social Strain Theory performs three critical functions. First, it provides causal logic linking institutional exclusion to vocational movement. Second, it reframes chaplaincy as innovation rather than deviation, preserving the integrity of Black clergywomen's theological commitments. Third, it bridges structural analysis and lived

experience, preparing the ground for the integrated framework developed in the following section.

If home-place theory explains *how* vocational harm and restoration are experienced in space and in the body, strain theory explains *why* sustained inhabitation of constrained contexts becomes untenable over time. Together, they illuminate the conditions under which vocational reconfiguration becomes not only possible, but necessary.

Transition to Integration

The next section brings Womanist theology, Critical Race Theory, home-place theory, and Social Strain Theory into explicit conversation. Where this section has explained why vocational innovation emerges under constraint, the following section clarifies how these frameworks work together to interpret Black clergywomen's movement into higher education chaplaincy as a liberatory vocational home-place.

Integrating the Frameworks: Ethics, Structure, Space, and Vocational Adaptation

The central claim of this dissertation—that higher education chaplaincy functions as a liberatory vocational home-place for Black clergywomen—cannot be adequately theorized through a single disciplinary lens.¹⁷⁹ The vocational lives under examination are simultaneously ethical, institutional, spatial, embodied, and adaptive. Each of these dimensions is essential; none is sufficient on its own. Accordingly, this study employs an integrated theoretical framework that brings Womanist theology, Critical Race Theory, bell hooks' home-place theory, and Social Strain Theory into disciplined conversation. This integration is not additive or eclectic. It is demanded by the complexity of vocation as it is lived under conditions of structural constraint.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 18.

¹⁸⁰ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 161.

This section clarifies how these frameworks function together as a coherent analytic architecture. Rather than restating what each framework contributes independently, it articulates how their integration enables an interpretation of vocation that would otherwise remain fragmented or incomplete. What becomes visible at their intersection is a grammar of vocation attentive to ethics, power, space, embodiment, and adaptation—one capable of naming both harm and discernment without collapsing one into the other.¹⁸¹

Why Integration Is Analytically Necessary

Each framework employed in this dissertation addresses a critical dimension of Black clergywomen's vocational experience, yet each also carries limitations when deployed in isolation.

Womanist theology offers normative clarity and ethical grounding, centering Black women's embodied wisdom and moral discernment. However, without sustained attention to institutional mechanics, it risks under-theorizing how exclusion persists even in spaces committed to justice. Critical Race Theory provides a powerful account of structural power, normativity, and institutional reproduction, yet on its own it cannot adjudicate theological questions of faithfulness, calling, or flourishing. Home-place theory illuminates the spatial and embodied conditions of belonging and restoration, but without structural analysis it can risk romanticizing refuge without explaining why refuge becomes necessary. Social Strain Theory explains patterned adaptation under constraint, but without ethical framing it can reduce vocational movement to rational response rather than moral discernment.

The integrated framework developed here responds to these limits directly. It insists that ethics without structure is naïve, structure without ethics is incomplete, space without power is

¹⁸¹ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 72.

sentimental, and adaptation without theology is thin.¹⁸² Only together do these frameworks allow for an account of vocation that honors constraint and agency, endurance and departure, suffering and imagination within the same analytic frame.

Distinct Analytic Questions, Coordinated Answers

Within this integrated architecture, each framework addresses a distinct analytic question, while remaining accountable to the others.

Womanist theology addresses the ethical question: What constitutes faithful vocation, and whose knowledge authorizes that determination?

Critical Race Theory addresses the structural question: How do institutions reproduce exclusion even when they profess commitments to justice and inclusion?

Home-place theory addresses the spatial question: Where can vocation be inhabited with dignity, restoration, and integrity?

Social Strain Theory addresses the adaptive question: Why does vocational reconfiguration emerge as a patterned response to institutional blockage rather than as anomaly or failure?¹⁸³

What distinguishes this study is not the presence of these questions, but the insistence that they cannot be answered separately. Vocational discernment is ethical, but it is exercised within structures of power. Structural constraint is real, but it is lived in bodies and spaces. Spatial belonging matters, but it is shaped by institutional normativity. Adaptation is patterned, but it is also morally evaluated. The integration of these frameworks ensures that no single dimension dominates or distorts the analysis.

¹⁸² Nancy Fraser, "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age," *New Left Review* 212 (1995): 68.

¹⁸³ Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 195.

Womanist Theology as Normative Anchor

Within the integrated framework, Womanist theology functions as the normative anchor. It establishes the ethical horizon against which all vocational outcomes are assessed and refuses theological narratives that normalize Black women's suffering as spiritually redemptive. By centering wholeness, dignity, and embodied life as theological goods, Womanist theology ensures that vocational movement is not merely explained but evaluated.

This grounding is essential. Without it, vocational adaptation could be rendered intelligible sociologically while remaining ethically ambiguous. Womanist theology authorizes Black clergywomen as interpreters of their own vocational lives and affirms flourishing—not mere survival—as a legitimate measure of faithfulness.¹⁸⁴ It insists that vocation must be life-giving rather than extractive, and that ethical discernment must attend to the cumulative costs imposed by institutional arrangements.

Critical Race Theory as Structural Discipline

Critical Race Theory provides the structural discipline that prevents the analysis from collapsing into individualized discernment narratives. CRT names how institutional power operates through normativity, conditional inclusion, and professional expectation rather than overt exclusion. It explains why vocational strain is chronic rather than episodic and why reform efforts often stall despite rhetorical commitments to equity.¹⁸⁵

Within the integrated framework, CRT tempers theological romanticism. It reminds the analysis that institutions are not morally neutral contexts in which individuals simply succeed or fail. They are structured by histories and power arrangements that privilege certain forms of

¹⁸⁴ Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 78.

¹⁸⁵ Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, 12.

authority while rendering others provisional. This structural clarity is essential for understanding why vocational movement cannot be explained through personal preference or resilience alone.

Home-Place Theory as Embodied and Spatial Lens

Home-place theory introduces a spatial and embodied dimension often absent from vocational analysis. It shifts the focus from access to inhabitation, from representation to sustainability. Through this lens, bodily sensations—fatigue, vigilance, constriction, ease—become indicators of whether a space functions as a site of restoration or extraction.¹⁸⁶

Within the integrated framework, home-place theory bridges ethics and structure by showing how power is lived in the body. It explains why belonging cannot be inferred from inclusion alone and why vocational misalignment is often registered somatically before it is cognitively named. Home-place theory thus clarifies why discernment unfolds over time and why attachment to institutions can persist even as harm accumulates.

Social Strain Theory as Mechanism of Movement

Social Strain Theory provides the mechanism that links institutional exclusion to vocational innovation. It explains why individuals committed to the goals of ministry do not simply remain indefinitely within blocked systems. By framing chaplaincy as innovation rather than deviation, strain theory preserves the coherence of Black clergywomen's theological commitments while situating their movement within patterned institutional dynamics.¹⁸⁷

Within the integrated framework, strain theory does not operate deterministically. It is interpreted through Womanist ethics and home-place praxis. Innovation is not chosen because it is easier, but because it is more livable. Strain theory explains *why* movement occurs; Womanist

¹⁸⁶ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 134.

¹⁸⁷ Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 195.

theology interprets *what it means*; home-place theory reveals *how it is embodied*; and CRT situates it within *institutional power*.

Chaplaincy as Liberatory Vocational Home-Place

When these frameworks are integrated, higher education chaplaincy becomes intelligible as a liberatory vocational home-place rather than an alternative career track. Chaplaincy is not theorized as neutral, apolitical, or universally accessible. Instead, it is understood as a context in which Black clergywomen may more often align ethical commitments, embodied well-being, and exercised authority.

This alignment is not accidental. It emerges where institutional logics place less emphasis on sacramental gatekeeping and rigid hierarchy and greater emphasis on relational authority, pastoral competence, and ethical presence. Through the integrated framework, chaplaincy appears not as escape from ministry, but as theological adaptation under constraint—a site where vocation can be inhabited with greater coherence.

Avoiding Analytic Pitfalls

The integration advanced here guards against several persistent analytic pitfalls. It resists psychologization by situating vocational movement structurally rather than individually. It avoids institutional moralism by analyzing power without vilification or idealization. It prevents romanticization of innovation by acknowledging the constraints and pressures of chaplaincy. Finally, it resists theoretical fragmentation by disciplining each framework through the others.

This balance allows the analysis to remain critical without cynicism and hopeful without naïveté.

Preparing the Methodology Turn

This integrated framework directly shapes the methodology that follows. Because vocation is understood as embodied, spatially experienced, ethically evaluated, and structurally constrained, the study requires a method capable of holding narrative, sensation, critique, and theology together. The following section introduces Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography, the methodological approach through which the analytic commitments articulated here are enacted in practice.

Together, this section and the following form the hinge of the dissertation, linking theory to method and preparing the ground for narrative analysis that treats Black clergywomen's vocational lives as sites of theological knowledge rather than institutional anomaly.

Methodology: Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography

The integrated theoretical framework developed in this chapter requires a methodological approach capable of holding together ethical evaluation, structural critique, spatial analysis, embodiment, and vocational adaptation without reducing any one dimension to another. Black clergywomen's vocational lives, as theorized here, cannot be adequately studied through methods that privilege disembodied speech, retrospective coherence, or institutional documentation alone. These lives are not only narrated; they are felt, metabolized, and discerned over time through the body.¹⁸⁸

To meet this analytic demand, this dissertation employs Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography, an original methodological framework developed for this study.¹⁸⁹ This approach integrates Womanist theology, Critical Race Theory, home-place theory, and Social

¹⁸⁸ Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 22.

¹⁸⁹ Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.

Strain Theory with autoethnographic and sensory analysis to examine how Black clergywomen discern vocation under conditions of persistent institutional constraint. It treats embodied experience not as illustrative or supplementary, but as epistemically meaningful data through which power, misalignment, ethical clarity, and vocational possibility are apprehended.¹⁹⁰

Methodological Rationale

Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography emerges from a clear methodological problem: dominant qualitative approaches are poorly equipped to capture slow harm, embodied discernment, and ethical adaptation within institutions that normalize constraint.¹⁹¹ Interviews alone often privilege post hoc rationalization. Institutional texts obscure lived contradiction. Observation without positional intimacy misses tacit knowledge that is never spoken aloud.

This methodology responds by centering embodied narrative as analytic site, while disciplining that narrative through structural and theological interpretation. It does not treat experience as self-authenticating, nor does it subordinate lived knowledge to external verification. Instead, it asks how embodied experience becomes intelligible when read through power, ethics, space, and time.

Genealogy and Methodological Lineage

Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography stands at the intersection of several methodological traditions while deliberately revising each.

From autoethnography, it inherits the claim that reflexive narrative can function as legitimate knowledge production, particularly where marginalized experiences are routinely misread or erased. However, this method departs from expressive or confessional forms of

¹⁹⁰ Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2008), 33.

¹⁹¹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 97.

autoethnography. Narrative here is never left uninterpreted; it is consistently situated within institutional, sociological, and theological analysis.

From Womanist theology, the method draws its epistemological grounding. Womanist scholarship has long insisted that Black women's knowledge emerges through embodied survival, moral discernment, and relational care under constraint. This methodology formalizes that insight as research practice, refusing approaches that extract Black women's labor while dismissing their bodies as sites of knowledge.¹⁹²

From Critical Race Theory, the method takes its insistence that experience must be interpreted structurally. Personal narrative is not treated as idiosyncratic or exceptional; it is read as evidence of patterned institutional dynamics. CRT disciplines autoethnographic reflection by requiring attention to normativity, power, and institutional reproduction.

From embodied and sensory scholarship, the method draws its attention to the body as a site of knowing. Feminist, phenomenological, and somatic traditions have demonstrated that bodies register misalignment, safety, and threat before such realities are cognitively named. This methodology treats such registration not as intuition to be explained away, but as data requiring interpretation.

Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography emerges from the convergence of these traditions, while addressing their limitations through integration.

Epistemological Commitments: Embodiment as Knowledge

At the core of this methodology is a simple but contested epistemological claim: the body knows.¹⁹³ For Black clergywomen navigating institutions shaped by racialized and gendered

¹⁹² Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 4.

¹⁹³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 203.

power, bodily sensation often functions as an early warning system, a moral barometer, and a site of discernment. Tightness in the chest, chronic fatigue, hypervigilance in meetings, or constriction upon entering certain spaces are not merely stress responses; they are embodied interpretations of institutional reality.

Traditional research methods frequently marginalize such data, privileging articulated speech and institutional rationality. Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography challenges this hierarchy by recognizing that Black women have historically been required to suppress bodily knowledge in order to remain legible within dominant institutions. Re-centering sensory awareness is therefore not only methodological but political and theological.

This commitment aligns with Womanist theology's insistence that Black women's bodies are central to theological reflection, and with home-place theory's emphasis on felt safety and restoration as indicators of resistance and belonging.

Sensory Data as Analytic Evidence

In this study, sensory data includes bodily tension, fatigue, pain, vigilance, calm, ease, emotional constriction, and moments of somatic relief. These sensations are not treated as raw or self-evident. They are analyzed in relation to institutional encounters, relational dynamics, and vocational decision points.

Repeated bodily responses to meetings, worship spaces, or leadership interactions are interpreted as indicators of chronic institutional strain rather than isolated emotional reactions. Conversely, moments of grounding or spaciousness within chaplaincy contexts are analyzed as signs of vocational alignment and home-place formation.

Crucially, this method does not romanticize intuition or collapse analysis into affect. Sensory data is triangulated with memory, institutional context, and theoretical frameworks. The body is treated as informant, not oracle.¹⁹⁴

Autoethnography as Discernment, Not Disclosure

Autoethnography in this dissertation functions as a practice of discernment, not memoir. Narrative moments are selected because they illuminate thresholds—points at which vocational coherence was threatened, clarified, or reconfigured. Composite vignettes are employed to protect confidentiality and to emphasize pattern over personality.¹⁹⁵

The researcher's positionality as a Black clergywoman with sustained experience in both ecclesial and higher education contexts is central to the method. This positionality provides access to tacit institutional knowledge and embodied insight unavailable through external observation alone. Rather than attempting to neutralize this position, the methodology renders it explicit and accountable.

Reflexivity is maintained through ongoing interrogation of memory, power, and interpretation, including attention to what is remembered vividly, what is remembered somatically, and what resists articulation. Silence, ambiguity, and uncertainty are treated as analytically meaningful rather than as methodological deficits.

Ethical Commitments and Analytic Care

Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography is grounded in ethical restraint.¹⁹⁶ It resists the academic commodification of Black women's pain and rejects the assumption that exhaustive

¹⁹⁴ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 9.

¹⁹⁵ Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014), 62.

¹⁹⁶ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 116.

disclosure is necessary for analytic legitimacy. Narrative is employed selectively, guided by the ethical question: What must be named to clarify vocational truth, and what need not be relived?

Composite narratives, temporal blending, and analytic distance protect both the researcher and others from identification. This approach reflects Womanist ethical commitments to dignity, survival, and wholeness. The goal is not confession, but clarity.

Methodological Rigor and Validity

Rigor within this methodology is established through:

1. Theoretical triangulation, in which narrative and sensory data are consistently interpreted through the integrated framework developed in this chapter
2. Pattern recognition, prioritizing accumulation and recurrence over isolated incidents
3. Reflexive transparency, including explicit attention to positionality and interpretive limits
4. Analytic restraint, with claims bounded by context rather than universalized

Validity is not defined through replicability in the positivist sense, but through analytic coherence, ethical integrity, and explanatory power.¹⁹⁷ The method is evaluated by its capacity to make sense of vocational movement in ways that conventional approaches cannot.

Methodological Contribution and Transition

Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography constitutes an original methodological contribution across multiple fields. In theological studies, it formalizes Womanist epistemology as research method. In chaplaincy studies, it challenges depoliticized accounts of vocational life.

¹⁹⁷ Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1985), 290.

In qualitative research, it advances a disciplined approach to treating sensory experience as analytic data.

The chapters that follow apply this methodology to examine Black clergywomen's vocational trajectories, with particular attention to strain, slow knowing, discernment, and reconfiguration. Through sustained analysis of embodied narrative situated within structural critique, the dissertation demonstrates how higher education chaplaincy emerges as a liberatory vocational home-place—not as escape from ministry, but as a faithful and imaginative response to constraint.

Reframing Vocation: Toward a Liberatory Grammar of Calling, Belonging, and Authority

Chapter Two has constructed an integrated theoretical and methodological framework capable of interpreting Black clergywomen's vocational lives with ethical rigor, structural clarity, spatial attentiveness, and embodied depth. Together, Womanist theology, Critical Race Theory, bell hooks' home-place theory, Social Strain Theory, and Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography form a coherent analytic architecture through which Black clergywomen's movement into higher education chaplaincy can be understood not as deviation, retreat, or resignation, but as faithful vocational innovation under conditions of persistent institutional constraint.

This final section clarifies what that architecture makes possible. It names how the chapter reframes vocation itself, articulates the dissertation's central theoretical intervention, and establishes a grammar for interpreting calling, belonging, and authority when vocational life unfolds under unequal conditions.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁸ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 289.

From Fragmented Accounts to Integrated Understanding

A central contribution of this chapter is its refusal of fragmented explanation.¹⁹⁹ Existing scholarship has often approached Black clergywomen's vocational trajectories through partial frames—personal calling, institutional politics, professional opportunity, gender bias, or emotional exhaustion. Each of these perspectives captures a dimension of reality, yet none is sufficient on its own. Fragmentation obscures vocational discernment by separating elements that, in lived experience, are inseparable.

The framework developed here insists that vocation must be understood as simultaneously ethical, structural, spatial, embodied, and adaptive. Womanist theology establishes the moral criteria by which faithfulness and flourishing are evaluated. Critical Race Theory exposes how institutions reproduce exclusion even when they profess justice. Home-place theory centers the spatial and relational conditions necessary for restoration and belonging. Social Strain Theory explains why vocational reconfiguration emerges as a patterned response to institutional blockage. Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography provides the means for studying how these dynamics are discerned somatically over time.

Together, these frameworks allow the analysis to hold constraint and creativity, harm and agency, endurance and departure within a single analytic frame. The result is an interpretive account capable of naming both what limits Black clergywomen's vocational lives and how they respond with moral imagination.

¹⁹⁹ Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 101.

Reframing Vocation Beyond Institutional Loyalty

One of the most consequential outcomes of this chapter is its reframing of vocation itself. Within many ecclesial traditions, vocation is implicitly tethered to institutional loyalty. Staying is valorized, endurance is sanctified, and departure is frequently interpreted as failure or insufficient faith. For Black clergywomen, leadership is often affirmed rhetorically while being constrained structurally, producing a theological contradiction that remains largely uninterrogated.

This chapter disrupts that logic. Drawing on Womanist theology, it reframes vocation as an ethical and relational practice rather than a static institutional placement. Faithfulness is not measured by proximity to power, longevity within a single structure, or compliance with exclusionary norms.²⁰⁰ It is measured by the capacity to live one's calling with integrity, dignity, and wholeness over time. Flourishing is not treated as optional or secondary, but as a theological imperative.

This reframing neither romanticizes departure nor dismisses ecclesial tradition. Instead, it exposes the theological cost of equating institutional preservation with divine will. When institutions consistently erode spiritual, emotional, and bodily well-being, remaining cannot be presumed virtuous—and leaving cannot be presumed unfaithful.

Naming Constraint Without Collapsing Agency

A second critical contribution of this chapter is its refusal of false binaries between structure and agency.²⁰¹ Black clergywomen's vocational narratives are often individualized—

²⁰⁰ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 196.

²⁰¹ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 14.

interpreted through personality conflict, burnout, or professional preference—thereby obscuring the patterned nature of exclusion and placing responsibility for adaptation solely on individuals.

Through the integration of Critical Race Theory and Social Strain Theory, this chapter names constraint as systemic, cumulative, and predictable. Institutions are not neutral contexts; they are shaped by histories, norms, and power arrangements that determine who is authorized to lead, whose authority remains provisional, and whose labor is extractable. Strain accumulates not through isolated incidents, but through repeated experiences of partial authorization, deferred legitimacy, and conditional belonging.

At the same time, this framework resists structural determinism. Black clergywomen are not rendered passive by institutional failure. Through strain theory's emphasis on innovation and Womanist theology's affirmation of moral agency, vocational movement is understood as creative and faithful response. Agency here is not heroic individualism, but discernment exercised under pressure and guided by ethical clarity and embodied wisdom.

Space, Embodiment, and the Politics of Belonging

By incorporating home-place theory and Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography, this chapter foregrounds a dimension often absent from vocational analysis: the politics of space and embodiment. Vocation is not only enacted through roles and credentials; it is lived through bodies in spaces. It is registered in tension, vigilance, constriction, ease, and rest. These sensations function as indicators of whether a space sustains life or extracts it.

Home-place theory clarifies why belonging cannot be reduced to access or representation. A space may be formally inclusive while remaining inhospitable to full inhabitation. Black clergywomen may be present yet required to self-monitor continuously, regulate affect, and

fragment identity to remain acceptable. Over time, such conditions exact a bodily and spiritual toll that is both theological and political.

By treating sensory experience as epistemically meaningful, this chapter legitimizes forms of knowing that institutions have historically dismissed. Slow knowing—the gradual accumulation of embodied insight—is recognized as a valid mode of vocational discernment rather than emotional excess or indecision.²⁰² This recognition is particularly consequential for Black clergywomen, whose embodied responses are often scrutinized even as they are relied upon for care.

Chaplaincy as Liberatory Vocational Home-Place

Within this rearticulated grammar of vocation, higher education chaplaincy emerges as a liberatory vocational home-place.²⁰³ This does not imply that chaplaincy is free from constraint or uniformly sustaining. Rather, it is understood as a vocational context that often offers greater alignment between ethical commitments, embodied well-being, and exercised authority.

Through the integrated framework developed here, chaplaincy becomes intelligible as a space in which spiritual authority is practiced relationally rather than gatekept sacramentally; where care work is recognized as leadership rather than feminized labor; and where space can be shaped intentionally to foster restoration and belonging. Social Strain Theory reminds us that innovation redistributes constraint rather than eliminating it. What distinguishes chaplaincy, however, is the possibility of coherence—the capacity to inhabit vocation without constant ethical compromise.

²⁰² Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 275.

²⁰³ Eboni Marshall Turman, “Black Women’s Faithfulness and the Ethics of Staying,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 4 (2016): 1022.

A Womanist Intervention in Vocation Studies

This chapter constitutes a Womanist intervention in broader conversations about vocation, ministry, and leadership.²⁰⁴ It challenges frameworks that universalize vocational experience without accounting for race, gender, and institutional power. It resists theological narratives that sacralize suffering without interrogating who is asked to suffer and why. It extends Womanist ethics beyond critique into constructive vocational theory.

By integrating theology, sociology, spatial theory, and embodied method, this chapter offers a model for studying vocation attentive to who is sustained, who is harmed, and who is required to adapt. It insists that vocational legitimacy cannot be separated from justice and that discernment cannot be abstracted from the conditions under which it is exercised.

What This Chapter Makes Possible

Chapter Two does not seek to exhaust the meaning of Black clergywomen's vocational lives. It establishes the conditions under which those lives can be interpreted with integrity. It provides a framework capable of reading vocational movement as ethical discernment rather than deviation, innovation rather than retreat, and authority rather than accommodation.

The chapters that follow activate this framework through narrative analysis grounded in Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography. In doing so, the dissertation examines how Black clergywomen experience strain, recognize misalignment, cultivate home-place, and reconfigure vocation. The theory developed here ensures that these narratives are read not as personal anecdote, but as sites of theological knowledge and vocational imagination.

²⁰⁴ Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, 145–150.

Central Claim, Restated

Black clergywomen's movement into higher education chaplaincy represents a faithful, intelligible, and liberatory vocational response to chronic institutional constraint. It is not a rejection of ministry, but an expansion of it; not a failure of endurance, but a refusal of harm; not an abandonment of calling, but a commitment to live that calling with integrity, coherence, and wholeness.

By articulating this claim theoretically and methodologically, Chapter Two establishes the analytic foundation for the dissertation's core contribution: a reimagining of vocation that honors Black clergywomen not as exceptions to inherited frameworks, but as theologians of practice whose lives expose their limits and point toward more just possibilities.²⁰⁵

Conclusion

Chapter Two has established the theoretical and methodological foundation necessary to interpret Black clergywomen's vocational lives with depth, rigor, and analytic clarity.²⁰⁶ By integrating Womanist theology, Critical Race Theory, bell hooks' home-place theory, Social Strain Theory, and Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography, this chapter has developed an analytic framework capable of holding together ethics, institutional power, spatial experience, embodiment, and vocational adaptation without collapsing one dimension into another.²⁰⁷

This framework reframes vocational movement not as personal deviation, institutional failure, or individual burnout, but as faithful discernment exercised under conditions of persistent structural constraint.²⁰⁸ It challenges ecclesial assumptions that equate faithfulness with endurance and authority with institutional sanction, while naming the ethical, spiritual, and

²⁰⁵ James W. McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 23.

²⁰⁶ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 251.

²⁰⁷ Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, 167.

²⁰⁸ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 171.

bodily costs such assumptions impose on Black clergywomen.²⁰⁹ In doing so, the chapter provides a grammar of vocation attentive to justice, wholeness, and lived experience²¹⁰—one that recognizes vocational innovation as a theologically coherent response to harm.²¹¹

With this analytic architecture in place, the dissertation now turns from theoretical construction to methodological enactment. Chapter Three details the research design and analytic procedures through which Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography is operationalized. Together, these chapters prepare the ground for a sustained examination of Black clergywomen's vocational trajectories—one that honors their discernment, names institutional realities without euphemism, and illuminates higher education chaplaincy as a site of liberatory vocational possibility.²¹²

²⁰⁹ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 201.

²¹⁰ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 289.

²¹¹ Turman, "Black Women's Faithfulness," 1026.

²¹² Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014), 135.

Chapter Three: Embodied Testimony and the Practice of Liberatory Ministry

Chapter Purpose and Analytic Orientation

This chapter marks a decisive shift in the dissertation's analytic trajectory—from diagnosing historical and structural constraints to examining lived ministerial practice. Having established the theological, institutional, and methodological conditions that shape Black clergywomen's vocational trajectories, this chapter turns to chaplaincy as it is already practiced in higher education. Rather than asking whether chaplaincy *can* serve as a liberatory vocational home-place, this chapter examines how Black clergywomen *enact* this ministry in real institutional contexts.

Chapters One and Two demonstrated that Black clergywomen's exclusion from senior ecclesial leadership is neither episodic nor anomalous but is structurally produced by the convergence of patriarchy, biblical literalism, respectability politics, and racialized institutional power. Those chapters also established an interpretive framework grounded in Womanist theology, Critical Race Theory, Social Strain Theory, bell hooks' theory of home-place, and the methodological approach of Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography. Together, they reframed vocational movement not as an individual choice or preference but as a patterned response to sustained institutional constraints.

Building on that foundation, this chapter shifts the analytic focus from causation to practice—from why chaplaincy emerges as a vocational site to what ministry looks like when chaplaincy is inhabited as a primary locus of calling rather than as a secondary alternative or refuge. The emphasis here is not on vocational discernment as a private interior process but on ministry as it is publicly enacted, institutionally situated, and bodily lived.

Accordingly, this chapter does not rehearse the theoretical genealogies or methodological justifications already established. Womanist theology, Critical Race Theory, Social Strain Theory, home-place theory, and Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography serve here not as objects of explanation but as analytic lenses. Their validity is assumed, and their work is advanced through close attention to lived experience, institutional practice, and embodied knowledge.

The central claim of this chapter is that Black clergywomen in higher education chaplaincy are not merely adapting to exclusionary ecclesial systems or seeking fulfillment outside traditional church structures. Rather, they are actively enacting a coherent, recognizable form of ministry—one that integrates spiritual authority, ethical leadership, institutional critique, and embodied care within contemporary public institutions. As these women practice it, chaplaincy offers a present-tense alternative to patriarchal ecclesial models: a form of ministry that does not await institutional permission to lead but exercises authority relationally, ethically, and visibly.

This chapter treats chaplaincy not as an individualized vocational solution but as a patterned ministerial practice that can be observed, interpreted, and analyzed across multiple narratives and institutional settings. The focus is not on exceptional success stories or singular moments of affirmation but on recurring logics of leadership, care, and presence that emerge across participants' accounts. Attention is given to embodiment—how authority is felt and negotiated in the body, how institutional environments register somatically as constriction or relief, and how spatial context shapes the experience of ministry over time. These embodied dimensions are not supplemental to the analysis; they are central to understanding how ministry is sustained under conditions of constraint and possibility.

Methodologically, the chapter brings autoethnographic narrative and interview-based testimony into deliberate dialogue as co-constitutive sources of theological knowledge. The researcher's vocational narrative serves as an analytic anchor—not as autobiography or confessional reflection, but as a longitudinal case study tracing the accumulation of institutional strain, discernment, and vocational reconfiguration. This account is read alongside narratives from ten Black clergywomen serving in higher education chaplaincy, enabling identification of shared patterns, resonant tensions, and common ministerial logics across diverse contexts. Individual stories are not treated as isolated data points but as expressions of a collective vocational landscape shaped by similar structural pressures and ethical commitments.

Throughout the chapter, participants' testimonies are treated as co-constructed theological knowledge rather than raw or extractable data. Short, carefully contextualized excerpts illuminate broader patterns of practice, with interpretive emphasis on what these narratives reveal about authority, embodiment, institutional presence, and care. This approach resists both romanticizing chaplaincy and reducing participants' voices to illustrative anecdotes. Instead, it positions Black clergywomen as theologians and institutional actors whose lived practices offer critical insight into the contours of liberatory ministry in contemporary public institutions.

By examining chaplaincy as it is currently practiced, this chapter provides the empirical and theological groundwork for the dissertation's final movement. The practices documented here—forms of leadership exercised without patriarchal legitimation, modes of care grounded in embodied presence and relational accountability, and strategies of institutional engagement shaped by justice and survival—demonstrate that chaplaincy is not marginal to the future of ministry. It is a site where new configurations of spiritual authority and public theology are already taking shape.

In this way, Chapter Three serves as a hinge between diagnosis and constructive reckoning. It establishes that the liberatory possibilities named in earlier chapters are not merely aspirational but operational. What follows is an account of chaplaincy as lived practice—showing how Black clergywomen are already reconfiguring ministry in higher education and creating tangible spaces where care, justice, and spiritual leadership converge. Because the theoretical and methodological frameworks grounding this study have been fully established in Chapters One and Two, this chapter proceeds as an empirical–analytic enactment of those frameworks rather than as an additional site for literature review.

Methodological Enactment: Interpreting Embodied Ministerial Practice

This chapter operationalizes the methodological framework established in Chapter Two by applying Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography to the analysis of lived ministerial practice in higher education chaplaincy. Rather than revisiting the philosophical foundations or disciplinary genealogy of this approach, this section clarifies how the methodology functions in this chapter’s analytic work—specifically, how experience is constituted as evidence, how narratives are interpreted, and how ethical responsibility is maintained toward the women whose lives and ministries are represented.

Consistent with the analytic orientation outlined above, the method presented here is not a detachable set of procedures but a disciplined posture of attention. Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography directs attention to embodiment, narrative, and institutional life as interwoven sites of theological meaning. It assumes that vocation, authority, strain, and home-place are not abstract concepts but lived realities that unfold over time and are often first registered in the body—through tension and release, vigilance and ease, contraction and breath. This

methodological approach treats those embodied dimensions of experience as primary analytic data rather than illustrative background.

The questions guiding this chapter—how Black clergywomen practice ministry, how authority is exercised and constrained, and how chaplaincy is inhabited as a vocational home-place—cannot be adequately addressed through disembodied description or episodic accounts alone. They require attention to the sensory and spatial registers of institutional life: how it feels to move through spaces, how authority is negotiated in posture and tone, and how bodies respond to recognition or erasure. Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography offers a framework for holding those dimensions together without reducing them to psychology or sentimentality, treating them instead as theologically and institutionally significant forms of knowledge.

Data Sources and the Constitution of Evidence

Data for this chapter come from three interrelated sources: (1) the researcher's autoethnographic narrative, (2) semi-structured interviews with ten Black clergywomen serving in higher education chaplaincy, and (3) field-based observations and reflective notes from chaplaincy and ecclesial spaces. These sources are not arranged hierarchically or triangulated for positivist validation. Rather, they are understood as distinct vantage points within a shared vocational landscape, each illuminating how Black clergywomen navigate, inhabit, and reconfigure ministry across institutional contexts.

The autoethnographic narrative offers a longitudinal account of vocational life, spanning early religious formation, theological education, ecclesial inclusion and exclusion, and the transition into higher education chaplaincy. It is neither an autobiography nor a confessional reflection. Instead, it serves as a sustained case study that makes visible the slow accumulation of institutional strain, moments of discernment, and embodied shifts that accompany vocational

movement. Attention is given to concrete institutional encounters—conversations with pastors, search committees, and supervisors; moments of recognition or dismissal; and the bodily experience of moving between church and chaplaincy spaces.

Interview narratives extend and complicate this account. The ten participants in this study work across a range of institutional settings, including public universities, private liberal arts colleges, and research-intensive institutions. Their roles vary in title and scope, spanning chaplaincy, administrative leadership, teaching, and hybrid positions. Semi-structured interviews invited participants to narrate their vocational trajectories, describe experiences of authority and constraint, and reflect on how their bodies and spirits responded to different institutional environments. The interviews foregrounded practice over abstraction, focusing on how ministry is enacted in daily work rather than on how it is idealized.

Field-based observations and reflective notes provide a third analytic layer. These include observations of campus rituals, vigils, memorial services, interfaith gatherings, classrooms, and institutional meetings in which chaplains served as moral interpreters or pastoral leaders. They also include observations in Black Church contexts where chaplaincy identities intersected with ecclesial hierarchies. These materials are not treated as neutral event records but as interpretive snapshots that highlight spatial arrangements, affective tone, power dynamics, and bodily comportment.

Together, these sources provide evidence consistent with Womanist theological commitments and critical qualitative inquiry. Evidence is understood not as detached fact but as the convergence of repeated experiences, resonant narratives, and embodied responses that mark institutional spaces as constricting or life-giving. Analytically, what matters is not singular testimony but patterned experience across time, bodies, and settings.

Autoethnographic Narrative as Analytic Anchor

Within this assemblage, the autoethnographic narrative serves as an analytic anchor. It offers a rich, sustained account of vocational life that makes visible dynamics often obscured in institutional records or in episodic interviews. From early experiences of wonder and call to explicit encounters with ecclesial exclusion, the narrative traces how institutional messages about gender, race, and authority are absorbed not only cognitively but also somatically.

The narrative is crafted with deliberate attention to sensory and spatial detail. Writing becomes a mode of analysis through which past experiences are re-entered with critical and theological attentiveness—bodily tension, vocal modulation, and moments of contraction or expansion are examined to reveal what they disclose about institutional power. This narrative work is not a retrospective justification; it is an analytic reconstruction that allows patterns to emerge over time.

Crucially, the autoethnographic narrative is placed in dialogue with participant narratives rather than positioned above them. It does not serve as a paradigmatic story but as a richly textured instance of a broader phenomenon. Points of resonance and divergence between the researcher's experience and participants' accounts become sites for analytic inquiry, illuminating how similar structures operate differently across contexts while producing recognizable vocational patterns.

Interview Narratives as Co-Constructed Theological Knowledge

Semi-structured interviews are treated as spaces for co-constructed reflection rather than as instruments for data extraction. Each interview is a relational encounter in which Black clergywomen narrate their call, labor, strain, and practices of care in their own theological idiom.

Participants were not required to translate their experiences into predefined academic categories; their language and interpretive frames were treated as theologically meaningful.

During analysis, these narratives are treated as theological texts. Recurrent phrases and embodied descriptions—such as breathing, ease, vigilance, or permission—are examined for the assumptions they convey about authority, legitimacy, and divine call. Attention is paid not only to what is said but also to how it is said: what is repeated, what is hesitated over, and what is narrated with affective charge.

Analytic engagement involved multiple readings and memo-writing focused on recurring logics of practice rather than rigid thematic coding. Questions guiding interpretation included: How is authority exercised and constrained? To whom do chaplains understand themselves accountable? How do bodies register affirmation or harm? How is chaplaincy narrated—as departure, reconfiguration, or homecoming? These logics were read across narratives to identify patterned forms of ministry rather than individual idiosyncrasies.

Sensory and Spatial Attention as Analytic Lens

A defining feature of Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography is its insistence that sensory and spatial experience is integral to theological reflection. In this chapter, chaplaincy and ecclesial spaces are read as institutional texts that convey belonging, authority, and constraint through arrangement, sound, movement, and posture.

Descriptions of bodily responses—such as shoulders dropping upon entering an office or voices tightening in a pulpit—are read as signs of institutional recognition or surveillance. Spatial analysis extends beyond individual rooms to institutional geographies: the placement of chaplaincy offices, access to leadership spaces, and movement between margins and centers.

These dynamics reveal how chaplains inhabit institutions as both insiders and critics, as caregivers and boundary-crossers.

Writing as Analysis and Womanist Practice

In this chapter, writing serves as a primary mode of analysis rather than a neutral vehicle for reporting findings. The composition of autoethnographic scenes, the placement of participant excerpts, and the sequencing of analytic sections are interpretive acts. This approach aligns with Womanist traditions of theological reflection through narrative, testimony, and lived wisdom.

The decision to present short, contextualized excerpts rather than full transcripts reflects this interpretive stance. It recognizes that narrative meaning emerges through selection, framing, and restraint. Silence and withholding are treated not as methodological deficits but as ethical and theological choices shaped by care, risk, and reverence.

Ethical Commitments and Womanist Research Praxis

Underlying this methodological approach is a Womanist ethic of care that shapes how stories are gathered, interpreted, and presented. Ethical responsibility extends beyond formal protocols to include attention to power, vulnerability, and the consequences of representation. Decisions about anonymization, contextual detail, and generalization are guided by a commitment to avoid making participants' pain consumable while honoring the truth of their experience.

Within this framework, rigor is defined not by distance or neutrality but by interpretive consistency, attentiveness to contradiction, accountability to participants' self-understandings, and transparency about the researcher's location. Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography is rigorous precisely because it refuses to detach knowledge from bodies, stories, and institutional conditions.

By operationalizing the method in this way—through layered data sources, dialogical narrative engagement, sensory and spatial analysis, writing-as-interpretation, and a Womanist ethic of care—this chapter lays the analytic groundwork for examining chaplaincy as practiced ministry. The sections that follow build on this foundation to trace the ministerial logics that emerge when Black clergywomen inhabit chaplaincy as a primary vocational site: forms of authority exercised without patriarchal legitimation, practices of care grounded in embodied presence, and strategies of institutional engagement that make chaplaincy a lived vocational home-place within higher education. What follows is not an illustration of this method but its execution.

Autoethnographic Anchor: Vocational Life Under Constraint and Reconfiguration

Within this chapter, my vocational trajectory serves as a primary autoethnographic case that makes the dynamics analyzed throughout the dissertation concrete. In line with Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography, this narrative is not incidental background but a site of theological, institutional, and embodied insight. It offers a longitudinal account of how race, gender, call, and institutional power converge over time and how higher education chaplaincy emerges not as a consolation prize but as a hard-won vocational home-place.

What follows is therefore not an exhaustive autobiography but a curated narrative organized around moments of institutional encounter, bodily knowing, and spiritual discernment that illuminate the broader patterns traced in this study. These scenes are selected for making visible the movement from “no home-place” toward chaplaincy as a lived site of liberatory ministry.

Early Formations: Wonder, Pluralism, and the Desire to Serve God

My earliest experiences of God were marked by beauty and curiosity rather than doctrinal certainty. In a Montessori preschool housed in a Catholic church, I was captivated by stained-glass windows that cast color across the floor. I did not yet have theological vocabulary, but I knew the care invested in those windows signaled a God worthy of such devotion. That awe sparked an early desire: to live a life in service to this beautiful and powerful God.

In our home, Norman Rockwell's *The Golden Rule* hung prominently, depicting people of many races and religions beneath the inscription, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." My parents invoked that commandment regularly, framing our spiritual world as one in which religious difference was not a threat but a series of pathways toward union with God. Disenchanted with the hypocrisy and gendered control of the conservative Christian tradition my mother had known, my parents chose pluralistic formation: Unity Church services, Native American powwows, Jewish seders, Buddhist ceremonies, visits to Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls, and more. Jehovah's Witness women were welcomed into our home to teach me Bible stories.

In this environment, I came to understand religion less as a fixed system of propositions and more as a set of practices through which people seek meaning, connection, and moral order. My curiosity about how communities live out their relationship with the divine—how religion shapes lives and provides direction—became a persistent thread in my identity.

For this project, these early years matter because they instilled in me a deep attachment to ministry as service and a wide-angle view of religious possibility. Long before I had language for "chaplaincy," I was being formed to see spiritual care as something that could span traditions,

spaces, and identities. At this stage, however, my desire “to serve God” had not yet collided with the gendered constraints of ecclesial life. Service was assumed to be welcome.

Displacement, Longing, and the First Experience of “No Home-Place”

Adolescence brought a different set of lessons. When my family moved from suburban Ohio to London after my ninth-grade year, I experienced profound dislocation. I left behind a school where I felt competent and known, a burgeoning identity as an elite soccer player, and the familiar racial landscape of a predominantly black-and-white American context. In London, I became a Black American expatriate—hyper-visible yet culturally unmoored.

At international schools, I encountered classmates from around the world, deepening my exposure to religious diversity. Several of my closest friends were Muslim; they invited me to pray with them and to join their observance of Ramadan. I was drawn to Islam’s structured ritual life—its prayer times, bodily postures, and clear commitments. I considered conversion not a rejection of my earlier formation but an expression of longing for rootedness and a life explicitly ordered toward God.

Yet the richness of these experiences coexisted with persistent loneliness. I inhabited a liminal space: not fully at home in the United States, not fully at home in Britain, and not anchored in any single religious community. I felt what I now call “no home-place”—a bodily and spiritual yearning for belonging that I could not locate. The absence of home-place registered as restlessness and spiritual unmooring.

This experience foreshadows a vocational pattern that recurs in later ecclesial contexts: being close to spiritual life yet not fully at home within the structures that govern it. It sharpened my intuition that belonging is not merely doctrinal but spatial and embodied—that home-place is felt in the body as ease, rootedness, and coherence, and its absence as strain.

Academic Constraint and the Early Silencing of Call

My early entry into higher education both intensified and reshaped these dynamics. After completing the International Baccalaureate early, I began college at Wellesley at sixteen. A course on Harold Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* articulated questions I had carried since childhood about suffering, justice, and God. For the first time, I saw academic study of religion as a possible home for my intellectual and spiritual curiosity. I called my parents and tentatively suggested majoring in religion.

Their response—rooted in understandable concern about employability—effectively closed that door. Together, we decided I should remain on the pre-law or pre-med track. The implicit message was that a life oriented toward thinking and teaching about religion was not viable. My body registered the decision as loss before I could articulate why: a quiet inward constriction accompanied the choice to set aside the major that had briefly illuminated a sense of fit.

When I later transferred to the University of Virginia and majored in government and foreign affairs, I carried the memory of that silencing. Those years were marked by spiritual estrangement. College life offered distractions—social life, parties, the typical “freedoms” of campus—but none of them addressed the deeper disconnection I felt from God. I inhabited institutions that valued my intellect and ambition but did not necessarily welcome the questions that had always animated me.

This period illustrates how institutional norms—here, the pragmatic logic of career-oriented education—constrain the perceived legitimacy of religious and vocational desire. The constraint was not yet explicitly gendered or racialized, but it narrowed my imagination of what

counted as responsible. A pattern emerged: the call to serve God resurfaced repeatedly, and just as often it was deferred, redirected, or subordinated to external expectations.

Conversion to a Restrictive Christianity and the First Fracture

In my early twenties, I tried to resolve this dissonance by embracing a more conservative form of Christianity. I joined a prominent Black Baptist church in Cleveland and was baptized there at twenty. I adopted a narrative in which the freedoms of adolescence represented distance from God, and my new commitments marked restoration. Like the familiar “Footprints” poem, I reinterpreted my life as one in which God had carried me all along.

During this period, my understanding of what pleased God narrowed. I absorbed gendered ideals that positioned me primarily as a wife, mother, and homemaker. When I married at twenty-four and became a mother to two children in quick succession, I invested deeply in these roles, believing they embodied faithfulness. My desire for ministry did not disappear, but I bargained with God: I would set my call aside, trusting that if it were truly from God, it would one day return with undeniable force.

It did. The desire to serve through ministry intensified rather than faded. I could not imagine a life without teaching and caring for God’s people in a sustained way. With my pastor’s support, I discerned a call to pursue theological education at the University of Chicago Divinity School.

The cost was immediate and severe. When I shared my plans with my then-husband, his reaction turned violent. He and his family rejected the legitimacy of my call on the basis of my gender and opposed my leaving home for graduate study. The conflict ultimately led to separation and divorce, leaving me a single mother of two very young children at the threshold of a demanding academic journey.

This was my first explicit, personal encounter with what I later called the “stained-glass ceiling”: the conviction, enforced through intimate relationships as much as through church structures, that a woman’s desire to answer God’s call as a minister was not only misguided but intolerable. My body registered this fracture as both terror and relief: terror at the insecurity that followed, and relief at refusing to collapse my call into invisibility.

Here, autoethnographic attention reveals how theological claims about gender and ministry are lived—not only in pulpits or synods but also in kitchens, courtrooms, and custody arrangements. These claims determine who feels safe pursuing ministry and at what cost.

The Black Church as Both Formation and Constraint

My years at the University of Chicago deepened my understanding of how these dynamics operate within institutions. Field education placements in two congregations—a large Black United Church of Christ congregation and a smaller American Baptist church—offered contrasting experiences of how Black clergywomen’s calls are received.

In the larger congregation, I served alongside other Master of Divinity students, all men. Although we shared similar educational trajectories, our opportunities diverged sharply. My male colleagues were invited to weekly staff meetings, shepherded through ordination processes, and groomed for senior pastorates. I was told I did not need to attend staff meetings and that I “had time” to consider ordination, even though I was at the same stage of preparation as my peers.

One moment remains emblematic. During a post-service discussion with deacons, trustees, pastoral staff, and interns, the male interns openly expressed aspirations to become senior pastors. When I voiced the same desire, the pastor paused, looked at me, glanced at the male elders, and then turned away without acknowledging it. The conversation continued as if I had not spoken.

This silence was liturgical, though it never appeared in a bulletin. It served as a negative benediction—a public, embodied signal that my aspirations did not belong in the shared vocational imagination. Stereotype threat took shape in that silence. I began to question whether my sense of call was misguided or whether these barriers were divine signs to step back.

By contrast, a smaller American Baptist congregation offered a different experience. Under a pastor who mentored and affirmed me, I was licensed and ordained and encouraged to exercise pastoral authority. I led ministries, preached, and found joy in serving women who, like me, navigated cycles of domestic violence and marginalization. In this setting, my body experienced ministry with greater ease: I stood, moved, and spoke without constantly bracing against erasure.

These contrasting placements underscore a key analytic point: the Black Church is neither simply oppressive nor uniformly liberative. It is both a site of profound spiritual formation and a place where patriarchy and racialized gender theologies remain entrenched. My body learned to distinguish between congregations that treated my presence as an anomaly to be managed and those that treated my calling as a gift to be nurtured. The stained-glass ceiling was not a metaphor but a set of practices and silences that determine who is presumed to belong in the pulpit.

Uneven Pathways and the Emergence of Chaplaincy

Marriage to a fellow graduate student in ministry offered yet another vantage point. As my spouse's career unfolded, I observed that doors opened relatively easily in Black Church contexts: invitations to preach, candidacy for senior pastor roles, and recognition as a promising leader. Meanwhile, I remained in unpaid or undercompensated roles, often working alongside him without commensurate recognition or opportunity.

This disparity did not reflect differences in training or devotion. We were similarly educated and similarly called. The difference lay in how our bodies were read within ecclesial space: his aligned with normative expectations of pastoral leadership; mine was treated as contingent, negotiable, or supplementary. Over time, the strain of this unequal vocational landscape mounted. I began to consider alternative pathways—clinical pastoral education, nonprofit leadership, or other roles that might allow ministry without constant struggle for legitimacy.

In this context, I received an invitation to apply for an associate chaplain position at Brown University. I remember taking the call in my car, feeling a mix of curiosity and guarded hope. Here was a ministry role not tethered to my spouse's career and less constrained by congregational assumptions about who could lead. It was set within a university—an institution where I had often felt intellectually alive, even when spiritually strained.

The decision to pursue chaplaincy marked a pivotal vocational reorientation. What had once seemed a potential “fallback” or secondary expression of ministry began to emerge as a primary site of calling. Chaplaincy did not signal a departure from ministry; it reconfigured where and how ministry could be faithfully carried out.

Chaplaincy as Home-Place: Embodied Relief and Vocational Coherence

In fifteen years of higher education chaplaincy, I have experienced a level of vocational coherence and embodied ease that stands in sharp contrast to many earlier ecclesial settings. As a chaplain and later as both chaplain and dean, I have been entrusted with spiritual care, institutional leadership, and public representation that recognize both my theological training and my pastoral gifts. Students, staff, and faculty come to me expecting pastoral authority, without questioning its legitimacy on the basis of my gender.

My body knows the difference. In chaplaincy spaces, my shoulders settle more easily. I do not brace for dismissal when I name my call or speak difficult truths. I am not constantly calibrating my tone, clothing, or gestures to prove I belong. The strain has not disappeared—higher education is contested terrain, especially amid attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion—but the foundational question of whether I am allowed to lead has receded.

When chaplaincy pulls me back into Black Church contexts, older patterns resurface. Invitations to preach are often limited to “appropriate” occasions—Women’s Day, Youth Sunday, special events—rather than ordinary Sundays. Interactions sometimes convey subtle skepticism about women’s authority, expressed through objectification, credential-checking, or relegation to specific forms of service. In these spaces, my body again feels the tension of having to justify my presence.

In this contrast, chaplaincy emerges as a vocational home-place. Following bell hooks, home-place is not merely a physical location but a site of resistance and restoration, where one’s full humanity is affirmed in the face of dehumanizing structures. In higher education chaplaincy, I have encountered such a space: a context in which my call as a Black clergywoman is neither an anomaly nor a threat but a gift to be exercised for the good of a community.

This autoethnographic account does more than trace a personal journey. It makes visible the movement from early wonder, through repeated encounters with ecclesial and institutional constraints, toward a form of ministry that allows my body and spirit to inhabit vocation with greater integrity. It demonstrates how patriarchy, racialized theology, and institutional power shape the options available to Black clergywomen—and how chaplaincy can become a site of sacred innovation rather than mere accommodation.

In the sections that follow, this narrative is set alongside the testimonies of other Black women chaplains whose stories echo and complicate these patterns. Together, our accounts reveal chaplaincy not merely as an alternative occupational path but as a lived, embodied practice of ministry that calls into question the adequacy of traditional ecclesial structures and points toward new possibilities for liberatory ministry in higher education and beyond.

What appears here as personal trajectory becomes, in the following section, a collective vocational pattern. What appears here as personal vocational trajectory becomes, in the following section, a collective, patterned ministerial logic.

Collective Ministerial Logics: Chaplaincy as Practiced Ministry

If the autoethnographic anchor offers a sustained account of vocational life under constraint and reconfiguration, the narratives of the ten Black clergywomen interviewed for this study broaden the frame. Their testimonies show that what appears at first glance as “individual career movement” is more accurately understood as patterned ministerial practice: a shared vocational grammar produced at the intersection of ecclesial exclusion, institutional opportunity, and Womanist commitments to survival, truth-telling, and communal care.

Taken together, participants’ stories resist two common misreadings of chaplaincy. The first is that chaplaincy is a private workaround for women who “could not make it” in church structures. The second is that chaplaincy is a neutral, professionalized form of ministry that leaves ecclesiology untouched. These testimonies point in a different direction. For these women, chaplaincy is not a retreat from ministry but a relocation of ministry. It is a deliberate shift into a space where pastoral authority can be exercised without constant patriarchal adjudication, where spiritual care can be practiced as public theology, and where Black women’s bodies can inhabit leadership with comparatively less compulsory shrinking.

This section traces three interrelated ministerial logics that recur across participants' accounts:

1. Authority without patriarchal gatekeeping
2. Chaplaincy as a vocational home-place
3. Institutional presence as moral and theological governance

These logics overlap in lived practice. A chaplain's authority is exercised through care; care is shaped by the institutional space available; and governance emerges through the rituals and ethical interpretations that chaplains are asked to provide in moments of crisis. Analytically distinguishing these logics, however, clarifies the chapter's core claim: Black clergywomen are not merely surviving in chaplaincy. They are actively enacting a coherent, justice-centered ministry within higher education that exposes the limits of patriarchal ecclesial models and demonstrates a viable alternative already in operation.

Authority Without Patriarchal Gatekeeping

Across participants' narratives, the most immediate contrast between chaplaincy and many congregational contexts was not simply "more opportunity" but a different architecture of authority. In traditional ecclesial settings, participants often described operating under what might be called borrowed authority: authority mediated through male senior pastors, denominational hierarchies, and local church cultures that treated women's leadership as provisional, derivative, or exceptional. Even when formally ordained, women often found their legitimacy continually negotiated—through preaching restrictions, informal scrutiny, coded language about "order," and the persistent demand to demonstrate humility in ways men were rarely asked to.

In chaplaincy, participants described encountering a different economy of authority—one grounded less in gendered sanction and more in institutional mandate, relational trust, professional formation, and the community’s needs. One participant contrasted these worlds in terms of shadow and permission: in her congregation, she had learned to “stay in the shadow” of male leadership, careful not to be perceived as “overstepping,” whereas in her chaplaincy role, the community came to her precisely because she *was* the chaplain. The authority of the role did not erase race and gender, but it shifted the presumptions: students and colleagues approached her expecting pastoral leadership rather than awaiting proof of her entitlement.

Several participants described this shift most vividly during campus crises—student death, racial incidents, or collective grief following national violence. In those moments, their presence as Black women leaders was not treated as a disruption of the norm but as a stabilizing center. Their testimonies repeatedly suggested that chaplaincy, unlike many church settings, does not require women to argue for the legitimacy of their pastoral presence before exercising it. The community’s expectations themselves serve as a form of authorization.

Yet participants were equally clear that chaplaincy authority is not unqualified. Universities have their own constraints: donor pressure, public relations anxiety, legal risk management, and institutional caution around anything labeled “political.” Chaplains described moments when administrators monitored “tone,” attempted to neutralize language about racism through euphemism, or implicitly signaled which kinds of justice claims were acceptable. One chaplain captured the tension precisely: her authority was real, but it was also watched. Chaplaincy did not end surveillance; it relocated it.

What distinguishes this surveillance from church-based patriarchal gatekeeping is the diffusion of accountability. Participants reported being accountable to multiple publics—

students, staff, faculty, cabinet-level administrators, and trustees—rather than to a single male ecclesial figure who can simply revoke access to the pulpit. This multiplicity can be constraining, yet it also creates strategic leverage. As one participant noted, when many communities rely on you to interpret and uphold the institution’s moral life, it becomes harder for any one actor to silence you without consequence.

Theologically, this ministerial logic signals a reconfiguration of pastoral authority. Participants described authority not in possessive terms—rule, headship, control—but in relational and ethical terms: holding grief, interpreting harm, convening community, and advocating for those made vulnerable by institutional practices. This aligns closely with Womanist theological commitments that locate legitimate authority in what nurtures survival and communal flourishing rather than in maintaining patriarchal order.

Importantly, participants repeatedly linked their chaplaincy practice to the memory of ecclesial exclusion. Their accounts suggest that chaplaincy authority is not merely enjoyed; it is consciously stewarded as a counter-practice. Several described refusing to reproduce the very gatekeeping that wounded them—being intentional about who is invited to speak, whose grief is centered, whose leadership is cultivated, and how spiritual authority is extended to students who have been told they do not belong in religious life. In this sense, authority without patriarchal gatekeeping is not only a form of personal liberation; it is also an ethical commitment to building a different kind of ministerial ecosystem.

Chaplaincy as Vocational Home-Place

A second ministerial logic that consistently emerged across testimonies was the experience of chaplaincy as a vocational home-place. Importantly, participants did not describe “home” as comfort, perfection, or the absence of conflict. Instead, they described home-place as

a site of human recognition—a space where their full selves could show up without compulsory diminishment and where ministry could be practiced with greater integrity and coherence.

Participants frequently described this home-place experience in bodily terms: breathing differently, shoulders dropping, no longer rehearsing every sentence in advance, and no longer anticipating that their leadership would be framed as disorder or arrogance. These somatic descriptions are not decorative metaphors; they serve as analytic evidence within Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography. They indicate a shift in the baseline conditions under which ministry is enacted, conditions shaped not only by job descriptions but also by the institutional habit of presuming or contesting Black women's authority.

For many, home-place also meant integration. Participants described the fragmentation they experienced in church contexts: being labeled “too academic,” “too feminist,” or “too outspoken” about race, and feeling compelled to mute parts of themselves to fit a narrow religious script of womanhood. Chaplaincy, by contrast, often required precisely what congregational life had constrained: theological depth, cultural analysis, trauma-informed care, institutional critique, interfaith fluency, and the capacity to hold contradiction without collapsing into simplistic answers. For some women, chaplaincy was the first vocational site where they did not have to compartmentalize their identities as Black women, theologians, intellectuals, and pastors. They could be all of it at once—and their communities needed them to be.

At the same time, participants resisted the romanticization of chaplaincy as a source of safety. Higher education is not neutral ground. It is a contested institutional terrain marked by racialized labor extraction, political backlash against equity work, budgetary austerity, and the emotional weight of student suffering. Many participants cited exhaustion, secondary trauma, and the loneliness of being one of few Black women in visible leadership. Yet they consistently

distinguished between two kinds of burden: the burden of work aligned with one's call and the burden of defending one's right to exist.

One chaplain's distinction captured this vocational difference: in chaplaincy, the work was heavy, but it was a weight she chose and that felt connected to purpose; in the church, the weight was often the labor of proving she was allowed to be there. In this framing, home-place is not the removal of strain but a shift in what strain signifies. Chaplaincy becomes home-place not because it is easy, but because it is *inhabitable*—because the self is less chronically forced into strategic shrinking.

This logic also reshapes how participants interpret their departure from Black Church senior leadership pathways. Many described an early assumption that “real ministry” meant congregational leadership and that chaplaincy was a deviation or compromise. Over time, they re-narrated the move as a Spirit-led relocation and an expression of theological clarity. Chaplaincy did not mean leaving ministry; it meant refusing a framework that treated Black women's call as negotiable. In that sense, chaplaincy becomes a vocational home-place not only because it affirms their humanity but also because it allows them to practice ministry without requiring patriarchal permission as an entry fee.

Institutional Presence as Moral and Theological Governance

A third ministerial logic woven through participants' testimonies concerns their role in moral and theological governance at the university. Chaplains rarely hold formal policy authority. Yet participants repeatedly described serving as ethical interpreters, ritual leaders, and moral interlocutors—particularly in moments when institutions must decide what they believe, what they will name, and how they will respond to harm.

Participants described being asked to craft rituals and statements after tragedies; to advise presidents, provosts, and deans during crises; to hold space for communal grief; and to accompany students and staff as they navigate racism, sexual violence, war, legislative attacks on queer and trans lives, and the destabilizing realities of modern campus life. They spoke of serving as translators between institutional language and human truth—insisting that harm be named accurately, that grief not be rushed toward resolution, and that institutional responses not be used as substitutes for reputational management.

In these accounts, chaplaincy emerges as a form of governance precisely because it shapes institutional meaning-making. Chaplains interpret not only sacred texts but also institutional texts: mission statements, strategic plans, public communications, commemorative rituals, and the moral narratives an institution tells about itself. Participants described “annoying questions” they felt compelled to ask— “Who is absent?” Who bears the cost of this policy? Whose pain is being managed rather than addressed? —and framed this questioning as theological work, not merely administrative critique.

This governance role is also relational and spatial. Participants described moving between rooms—student spaces, faculty meetings, senior leadership conversations, and board presentations—carrying concerns across institutional boundaries that otherwise do not communicate. In this movement, chaplains become conduits through which marginalized communities gain access to rooms where decisions are made. Even when chaplains cannot enact policy, they can reshape the ethical imagination that underpins policy crafting.

Yet participants emphasized the cost of this position. To be the moral interpreter of an institution is to live under multiple forms of accountability. Chaplains described the tension of maintaining students’ trust while retaining institutional access; being expected to hold grief while

being warned not to be “too political”; and being praised for presence while quietly disciplined for truth-telling. Several described the risk of tokenization—being used as symbolic proof of institutional goodness without accompanying structural change.

Here, participants’ experiences illuminate key CRT dynamics: the persistence of racism, the strategic containment of dissent, and the role of interest convergence in determining whether institutions embrace justice language or retreat. Chaplains navigate these conditions by leveraging relational capital, ritual authority, and theological imagination—often pushing institutions beyond what they would otherwise do while remaining clear-eyed about limits.

In this sense, the governance role is not an accidental by-product of chaplaincy. It is one of the primary ways chaplaincy functions as public theology in contemporary institutional life. Black clergywomen chaplains are asked—explicitly and implicitly—to help universities interpret who they are, what they value, and what they will do in the face of suffering. Their leadership is thus simultaneously pastoral and political, spiritual and institutional, intimate and public.

Synthesis: Chaplaincy as a Coherent Model of Liberatory Ministry in Practice

Across these three ministerial logics, a coherent picture emerges. Black clergywomen in higher-education chaplaincy are:

exercising authority grounded in call, preparation, and communal need rather than patriarchal permission.

inhabiting chaplaincy as a vocational home-place where body, identity, and ministry can align with less compulsory shrinking.

serving as moral and theological governance within universities that are themselves contested sites of power.

These are not incidental benefits of chaplaincy; they are defining features of how the women in this study practice chaplaincy as ministry. Together, participants' testimonies reveal chaplaincy as a fully articulated model of liberatory ministry already in operation—not speculative or merely aspirational, but enacted daily in offices, classrooms, committee rooms, vigils, and quiet pastoral encounters across campus.

Transition to next section: The following section shifts from these ministerial logics to the texture of practice itself—how chaplaincy is felt, signaled, and sustained through embodied and sensory registers—and how those registers function as theological data that further illuminate chaplaincy as a liberatory vocational homeplace within higher education.

Embodied and Sensory Dimensions of Liberatory Ministry: How Chaplaincy Feels, Signals, and Sustains “Home-Place”

If the preceding section identified recurring logics of authority, home-place, and governance, this section moves closer to the grain of lived practice. It asks not only what Black clergywomen chaplains do but also how their ministry is carried through breath and pacing, posture and silence, and the felt difference between bracing and belonging. This is not an aesthetic add-on to the chapter's argument. Within Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography, embodiment serves as evidence: the body registers institutional truth before institutions can name it and often continues to bear what institutions refuse to acknowledge.

For Black clergywomen, the body has long been an object of theological regulation and institutional suspicion. In many ecclesial contexts, the Black woman's body is simultaneously hyper-visible and under-authorized: watched for tone, disciplined for “attitude,” evaluated for modesty, applauded for labor, and constrained in authority. Under these conditions, embodied life becomes a site of continuous negotiation. Chaplaincy does not erase this history, yet participants

repeatedly describe a shift in their baseline bodily posture—an alteration in how they occupy space, use their voice, and manage how much of themselves to present to remain legible and safe.

This section examines chaplaincy as an embodied practice through five interconnected claims:

- (1) Black women's bodies serve as barometers of institutional conditions
- (2) somatic relief functions as theological data
- (3) spaces and atmospheres communicate authority and belonging
- (4) the chaplain's body becomes an instrument of care, witness, and boundary
- (5) ecclesial residue persists, requiring ongoing unlearning and discernment.

The Body as Barometer of Institutional Weather: Strain, Vigilance, and the Labor of Legibility

Across both autoethnographic narrative and interview testimony, participants described how ecclesial settings often required an additional layer of embodied labor beyond the ordinary demands of pastoral work. This labor is the labor of legibility: the ongoing monitoring of self—tone, facial expression, volume, cadence, dress, and gesture—to avoid being read through stereotypes that mark Black women as angry, immoral, unfeminine, or “out of order.” The result is not merely emotional fatigue but physical bracing: tightened shoulders, clenched jaw, restrained movement, measured laughter, and guarded speech.

Such bodily vigilance is shaped by institutional patterns rather than individual temperament. In contexts where authority is presumed to be male and female leadership is treated as an exception, the body learns that a single misstep may confirm what the system already believes. Participants described preaching or leading meetings while scanning the room:

Who looks disapproving? Who will report back to a pastor or board member? Which phrase will be deemed “too political” or “too much”? In these accounts, the body is not merely expressing anxiety; it is responding to a history of discipline.

Higher education chaplaincy does not remove Black women from the need to navigate power, but participants repeatedly described a shift in the texture of their vigilance. Rather than constant surveillance over whether they are allowed to lead at all, their vigilance in chaplaincy more often concerns the gravity of what they must hold: student trauma, institutional hypocrisy, public crisis, and the emotional overflow that campus life contains. The difference is subtle yet decisive. In one context, vigilance protects the self from illegitimation; in the other, it protects the community and the integrity of care. This distinction matters because it clarifies why chaplaincy can feel like a home-place even when it is exhausting.

Somatic Relief as Theological Data: Breath, Voice, and the Return of Spaciousness

Participants regularly described chaplaincy not only as a change in role but also as a change in bodily capacity—particularly in breathing. “I could breathe” and “my shoulders dropped” functioned across narratives as compressed statements of theological significance. These are not merely personal feelings; they are signs of what bell hooks describes as home-place: a site where Black women can reclaim their humanity in the face of forces that demand their diminishment.

In this study, somatic relief serves as a theological indicator. It marks moments when ministry can be practiced without chronic self-erasure. When a chaplain realizes she is no longer rehearsing every sentence before speaking, that shift signals not only comfort but also a reorientation of authority. When she can raise her voice in lament at a vigil without fearing she

will be labeled insubordinate, that is not simply emotional ease; it is the body registering a different moral economy.

This is where the sensory dimension of the methodology strengthens the dissertation's argument. If the church has often demanded that Black clergywomen shrink to be tolerated, and if chaplaincy allows them to take up more space without immediate punishment, then the body's testimony becomes evidence of institutional difference. Breath becomes data. Spaciousness becomes an argument. Relief is not proof that chaplaincy is perfect; it is proof that, in this context, the most basic conditions for ministerial integrity are more often met.

Atmosphere and Arrangement: Reading Space as Institutional Text

Embodied experience is inseparable from space. Participants' narratives repeatedly suggested that institutions communicate theology not only through doctrine or policy but also through spatial arrangements: who stands where, who sits where, what is elevated, what is centered, what is hidden, and what is controlled. Church spaces often taught participants their "place" through repeated spatial scripts: the pulpit reserved for men except on designated women's occasions, the placement of the platform chair, the microphone controlled by male leadership, and the subtle choreography of who speaks and who is thanked.

Chaplaincy spaces, by contrast, often invited a different spatial theology. Participants described offices arranged as refuges rather than as hierarchies: chairs at equal height, minimal physical barriers, symbols of plural belonging, and light and warmth intended to signal welcome. These decisions are not incidental; they are ministerial acts. They embody a theology of care in material form.

Ritual space also emerged as a site of embodied institutional critique. When chaplains design vigils, memorials, and interfaith gatherings, they shape the community's moral

imagination through sound, movement, silence, and symbol. Participants described resisting institutional tendencies to rush grief toward closure or to translate violence into neutral euphemisms. They attended carefully to who is named, whose pain is centered, and which forms of lament are permitted. In these practices, chaplains serve as liturgical architects who contest institutional denial by structuring spaces where truth can be told and held.

The Chaplain's Body as Instrument, Witness, and Boundary

Participants repeatedly described the chaplain's body as central to the practice of care. Chaplaincy is not primarily enacted through pulpit authority; it is enacted through presence: sitting with a student in despair, holding silence without panic, modulating the voice to create safety, and offering prayer that does not colonize but accompanies. In such moments, the chaplain's body becomes an instrument: posture conveys availability; facial expression conveys steadiness; and pacing conveys that the student's pain is not an inconvenience.

At the same time, the chaplain's body serves as a witness within institutions that often favor abstraction. When chaplains accompany students to meetings with administrators, stand with them during protests, or name harm in rooms where reputational management is the default, their bodies become living arguments. Their presence affirms that suffering is real, that neutrality is not morally innocent, and that spiritual care entails truth-telling.

This dual role—instrument of care and witness to institutional failure—requires boundaries. Participants described developing embodied practices of refusal: learning when to say no, when to step back, and when to stop allowing their presence to serve as institutional cover. This is a Womanist ethical commitment as much as a self-care strategy. If Black women's bodies have historically been treated as endlessly available for labor, then boundaries become a

theological practice of resisting disposability. Rest, limits, and refusal become part of liberatory ministry rather than departures from it.

Ecclesial Residue and the Work of Unlearning: When the Body Remembers

Even when chaplaincy offers greater spaciousness, participants described carrying what might be called ecclesial residue—the embodied memory of being disciplined, minimized, or compelled to doubt one’s call. The body does not immediately trust a new environment just because the job title changes. Many described moments of hesitation in senior leadership meetings, over-preparing for institutional sermons, or instinctively softening their critique, as if an invisible church committee were still present.

This residue is most visible when chaplains move between the church and the campus. Participants described old scripts reemerging in congregational spaces: modulating tone, policing gesture, and anticipating commentary on appearance or “respect.” The contrast between roles reveals that the body is an archive. It retains a record of where harm occurred, even after the mind has developed a rigorous critique of the structures that produced it.

Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography treats this residue as more than personal baggage. It reads it as evidence of the depth of patriarchal and racialized conditioning in ministerial formation. Unlearning is therefore part of chaplaincy practice. Participants described spiritual and psychological disciplines—prayer, therapy, communal reflection, and mentorship—that helped them discern when bodily alarm signals present danger and when it signals a replay of older institutional harm.

Embodied Knowledge as Theological Argument

Attending to embodiment strengthens rather than sentimentalizes the dissertation’s claims. When multiple Black clergywomen describe similar patterns of constriction in ecclesial

contexts and similar forms of relief and alignment in chaplaincy, the convergence itself becomes data. The point is not that chaplaincy feels better because it is modern or professional. Rather, the point is that the body registers a different set of conditions for enacting ministry without compulsory diminishment.

This embodied convergence complicates any interpretation of chaplaincy as a mere occupational preference. It shows that chaplaincy is a theologically charged repositioning of ministry: a shift toward spaces where Black clergywomen's authority can be exercised more fully, care can be enacted publicly, and home-place can be cultivated as both refuge and resistance. In that sense, breath and posture are not only personal experiences; they become signs of institutional truth.

The following section shifts from the embodied register to concrete praxis: the specific practices through which Black clergywomen chaplains cultivate home-place on campus—building rituals, mentoring leaders, responding to crises, teaching, advocating, and organizing institutional life so that care and justice become durable rather than episodic.

Practices of Liberatory Chaplaincy: Leadership, Care, and Institutional Engagement

If the previous section examined how chaplaincy is experienced as a liberatory vocational home-place, this section turns to how that freedom is enacted in practice. Here, the focus shifts from sensory and affective experience to ministerial action—what Black clergywomen *do* with the authority, spaciousness, and coherence they inhabit in higher education. These practices are not ancillary to chaplaincy's significance; they are how chaplaincy functions as a fully realized form of ministry rather than a compensatory role.

The practices described in this section reveal chaplaincy as a site of public, justice-oriented ministry that is continuous with—but not confined to—Black ecclesial tradition. Black

women chaplains do not abandon preaching, pastoral care, or prophetic critique upon entering higher education. Instead, they translate these practices into multifaith, secular, and politically complex institutional contexts. In doing so, they enact forms of leadership and care that would be difficult—if not impossible—to sustain within patriarchal congregational structures.

This section traces three interrelated domains of practice:

1. Ritual and liturgical leadership in moments of collective crisis and meaning-making
2. Everyday pastoral care and accompaniment as embodied, justice-conscious presence
3. Institutional engagement as sustained moral and theological formation

Together, these domains show that chaplaincy is not merely a different setting for ministry but a distinct mode of ministry—one shaped by public accountability, ethical interpretation, and relational authority rather than by ecclesial hierarchy.

Ritual and Liturgical Leadership: Naming Truth, Holding Grief, Refusing Erasure

One of the most visible arenas in which Black clergywomen chaplains exercise authority is public ritual. Campus vigils after student deaths, services responding to racial violence, interfaith gatherings, memorials, and moments of institutional transition serve as contemporary liturgical spaces where chaplains are expected to interpret events theologically and ethically. In these moments, chaplains are not peripheral; they are central narrators of meaning.

Participants consistently described ritual leadership as a context in which their authority is presumed rather than contested. When a crisis arises, institutions do not ask whether a Black woman chaplain may lead; they ask how she will lead. This presumption marks a critical departure from congregational settings, where women's liturgical authority is often restricted,

provisional, or symbolically contained. On campus, chaplains are invited to set the tone, language, and structure of the collective response.

Black clergywomen chaplains use this authority to resist institutional tendencies toward abstraction and depoliticization. Rather than framing harm in generalized or euphemistic terms, they insist on naming the specific forces at work: racism, misogynoir, anti-Black violence, queer- and transphobia, and state-sanctioned harm. As one participant noted, “If we refuse to say the word racism, we refuse to tell the truth—and ritual without truth is just theater.” This insistence positions ritual as an act of moral clarity rather than institutional reassurance.

Participants also described designing rituals that resist premature closure. Silence is extended rather than minimized; lament precedes hope; administrators are decentered so affected students speak first. These choices are not merely aesthetic. They reflect a Womanist theological commitment to honoring grief without spiritualizing it away and to recognizing that healing cannot be rushed in the service of institutional stability.

Liturgically, chaplains draw deeply on Black Church traditions while adapting them to pluralistic contexts. Call-and-response becomes a collective affirmation of dignity; candle lighting becomes a tactile act of shared witness; and Scripture is woven with Black feminist poetry, student testimony, and communal naming of loss. The result is a form of public theology that trains the campus to mourn, remember, and refuse erasure.

Through ritual leadership, Black clergywomen and chaplains do more than comfort communities—they shape institutional moral memory. They decide what is named, what is grieved, and what is remembered, thereby exercising a form of theological authority that is both public and consequential.

Everyday Pastoral Care and Accompaniment: Presence as Justice-Oriented Practice

Alongside public ritual, much of chaplaincy's liberatory power unfolds in everyday pastoral encounters. These interactions—conversations in offices, walks across campus, late-night phone calls, and quiet check-ins—rarely appear in institutional reports, yet they form the backbone of chaplaincy practice.

Participants described students arriving with concerns that are both personal and structural: anxiety shaped by racialized surveillance, exhaustion born of class precarity, spiritual confusion entangled with family and church trauma, and fear produced by political instability. Black women chaplains often become trusted figures for students who face marginalization along multiple axes and struggle to find institutional spaces where their experiences are fully legible.

In these encounters, chaplains practice a form of care that refuses to individualize structural harm. Rather than offering generic coping strategies disconnected from context, they help students name how systems of power shape their suffering. This does not diminish attention to emotional regulation or resilience; instead, it situates those tools within a truthful account of the conditions students face. As one chaplain explained, “I help students breathe—but I also tell them why they’re holding their breath.”

Embodiment is central to this work. Chaplains described using their bodies intentionally—through steady posture, regulated breathing, and grounded silence—to create spaces of safety and containment. For Black students, being met by a Black woman who listens without minimizing or spiritualizing their pain can be healing. Presence becomes a theological act, signaling that their lives and experiences matter.

At the same time, participants were clear that liberatory care requires boundaries. Having spent years overfunctioning in ecclesial contexts, chaplains described deliberately resisting patterns of limitless availability. They established referral networks, group-based care, and institutional partnerships to ensure that care does not depend solely on their personal labor. This boundary-setting reflects a Womanist ethic that regards sustainability as integral to justice.

Everyday pastoral care is thus a slow, cumulative practice of liberation. It affirms dignity, cultivates clarity, and helps students locate themselves truthfully within—and against—the structures that shape their lives.

Institutional Engagement: Moral Presence and the Long Work of Formation

A third domain of liberatory practice unfolds through institutional engagement. Black clergywomen chaplains occupy a distinctive position within universities: they are invited into decision-making spaces without direct policy authority. From committees and task forces to crisis-response teams and executive consultations, chaplains serve as moral interlocutors within systems primarily oriented toward risk management and reputation.

Participants spoke candidly about the ambivalence inherent in this work. Their presence is often welcomed symbolically, yet their influence is uneven. Recognizing this tension, chaplains develop strategies to leverage limited power: asking disruptive questions, reframing conversations around those most affected, and insisting that ethical considerations not be reduced to legal compliance or optics.

Rather than treating institutional documents as neutral artifacts, chaplains read them as moral texts. Policies, statements, and initiatives are examined to determine which lives they protect and which they endanger. One chaplain repeatedly challenged wellness initiatives that emphasized individual resilience while ignoring financial aid policies and policing practices that

exacerbated student distress. Another described long-term advocacy that helped develop restorative approaches to student conduct.

This work is slow and often invisible. Chaplains rarely see immediate results and are acutely aware of the constraints imposed by institutional self-interest. Yet participants emphasized that refusing this work would cede the moral terrain entirely. As one chaplain noted, “If I am in the room and say nothing, then silence becomes agreement.”

This form of engagement reflects a Womanist theological commitment to survival and accountability. It treats institutions as contested sites rather than neutral platforms and regards sustained presence as resistance. Chaplains do not see themselves as institutional saviors; they understand their work as incremental formation—shaping language, expectations, and moral imagination over time.

Integrative Practices: Teaching, Mentoring, and the Multiplication of Home-Places

Finally, many Black clergywomen chaplains extend their ministry through teaching and mentoring. Some hold formal faculty roles; others design co-curricular programs, retreats, or leadership initiatives. Across these settings, chaplains offer their vocational expertise as a resource for others—particularly women and students of color navigating call, constraints, and institutional life.

Rather than presenting linear success narratives, chaplains model critical discernment. They speak candidly about cost, compromise, and survival, offering students a more realistic vocational imagination than ecclesial idealism or institutional pragmatism alone can provide. Mentoring relationships become spaces where younger clergywomen learn to recognize harmful patterns, negotiate contracts, and discern when departure is faithful.

Through these practices, chaplaincy becomes generative rather than insular. It produces not only care for the present community, but also future leaders prepared to pursue justice-rooted ministry in diverse settings. In this way, chaplaincy serves as a seedbed for liberatory practice beyond the university's boundaries.

Section Synthesis

Taken together, these practices—ritual leadership, everyday pastoral care, institutional engagement, and integrative teaching and mentoring—demonstrate that higher education chaplaincy, as enacted by Black clergywomen, is a robust and theologically sophisticated form of ministry. It is neither neutral spiritual support nor a retreat from ecclesial leadership. Rather, it is a public, embodied, and institutionally situated practice through which Black women exercise authority without patriarchal gatekeeping, cultivate a home-place for themselves and others, and participate in the slow, contested work of institutional transformation.

The following section examines the implications of these practices for ecclesiology and vocational imagination, asking what it means that some of the most coherent and justice-centered expressions of Black women's ministry are flourishing not primarily in congregations but in the chaplaincy offices, classrooms, and public spaces of higher education.

Ecclesiological Disruption and Vocational Reframing

The practices documented in the preceding section demonstrate that Black clergywomen can “function well” in higher-education chaplaincy. Taken together, they reveal a deeper ecclesiological disruption: some of the most theologically grounded, pastorally rigorous, and justice-oriented forms of Black women's ministry are being carried out outside the institutional structures that have historically claimed exclusive authority over Christian leadership.

This is not merely a story of occupational migration. It is a reconfiguration of where ministry is recognized, how authority is exercised, and what constitutes faithful ecclesial practice.

Chaplaincy as De Facto Ecclesial Space

Although higher education chaplaincy is not formally constituted as “church,” the practices described in this chapter fulfill many of the core functions traditionally associated with ecclesial life. Black clergywomen chaplains preach—interpreting events through moral and theological lenses. They pastor—accompanying individuals and communities through grief, crisis, and discernment. They perform liturgy—presiding over rituals of lament, remembrance, celebration, and recommitment. They exercise oversight—shaping institutional responses, holding leaders accountable, and safeguarding communal values.

What distinguishes these practices from congregational ministry is not their theological thinness but their institutional location. Chaplaincy operates without ordination-based gatekeeping, male-dominated hierarchies, or the doctrinal policing that has historically constrained Black women’s leadership in church settings. Authority in chaplaincy is recognized through trust, relational accountability, and demonstrated competence rather than through gendered legitimacy.

In this sense, chaplaincy functions as a de facto ecclesial space—a site where ministry is enacted publicly, ritually, and ethically, even though it remains formally outside ecclesial jurisdiction. This does not render chaplaincy “church by another name,” but it does complicate inherited assumptions about where church happens and who is authorized to lead it.

The Exposure of Ecclesial Failure, Not Clergywomen's Deficiency

The flourishing of Black women's ministry in chaplaincy also casts the Black Church's exclusionary practices in sharper relief. The coherence, authority, and ethical clarity with which participants lead in higher education contexts undermine any claim that women's marginalization in church leadership stems from a lack of calling, preparation, or theological seriousness.

Instead, the contrast reveals a different truth: patriarchal ecclesial structures have failed to steward the gifts entrusted to Black clergywomen.

This chapter shows that when institutional conditions change—when women are not required to borrow authority, mute critique, or submit to gendered containment—their ministries do not diminish. They expand. The problem, then, is not women's fitness for leadership but the church's refusal to imagine leadership beyond male dominance and hierarchical control.

Vocational Reframing: From “Leaving” to “Relocating”

Participants' narratives also challenge dominant theological framings of vocation that cast leaving congregational ministry as loss, compromise, or failure. The move into chaplaincy is often interpreted—by churches and sometimes by clergywomen themselves—as a departure from “real” ministry. This chapter offers a different reading.

For the women in this study, chaplaincy is not an abandonment of their call but a relocation of it. It is a strategic, Spirit-led movement toward spaces where ministry can be practiced with integrity, coherence, and embodied alignment. Rather than diminishing ecclesial commitment, chaplaincy enables these women to enact the very practices—care for the vulnerable, truth-telling, public witness—that churches often claim as central to their mission yet undermine structurally.

This reframing unsettles vocational hierarchies that place congregational leadership at the apex of ministerial legitimacy. It suggests that fidelity to one's call may at times require leaving institutions that cannot—or will not—accept the fullness of one's ministry.

Ministry Without Permission

Perhaps most significantly, the practices documented here reveal a form of ministry that does not wait for ecclesial permission to exist. Black clergywomen chaplains exercise authority without authorization from patriarchal systems that have historically denied them access. They lead without apology, interpret without deferring, and care without self-erasure.

This does not mean chaplaincy is free of constraints. Universities remain racialized, bureaucratic, and politically fraught institutions. Yet the constraints of higher education differ fundamentally from those of the Black Church. Where ecclesial patriarchy functions as a theological prohibition—declaring women's leadership illegitimate—academic constraints operate through negotiation, surveillance, and interest convergence. The former denies authority outright; the latter manages it.

That difference matters. It creates space—however contested—for Black clergywomen to practice ministry that is publicly visible, institutionally consequential, and spiritually grounded.

Transitional Claim

What this chapter establishes, then, is not merely that chaplaincy “works” for Black clergywomen but that it exposes the inadequacy of inherited ecclesiologies that equate church with congregational structure and ministry with male leadership.

The next chapter addresses this implication directly. If Black women are already practicing coherent, liberatory ministry in chaplaincy—without ecclesial sanction—what does that mean for our understanding of church, authority, and vocation? And what new theological

imagination becomes possible when chaplaincy is no longer treated as peripheral but as a primary site of ecclesial innovation?

Chapter Synthesis: Chaplaincy as Lived Ecclesial Alternative: Empirical-Analytic

Synthesis

This chapter has examined higher education chaplaincy not as a secondary vocational option for Black clergywomen but as a fully articulated site of ministry that already serves as a practical alternative to patriarchal ecclesial models. Through close attention to lived practice—how authority is exercised, how care is embodied, and how institutions are navigated—this chapter has demonstrated that chaplaincy is not merely adjacent to ministry. It *is* ministry: public, relational, ethically grounded, and theologically generative. The analysis presented here draws exclusively on the empirical and narrative evidence developed in this chapter, interpreted through established theoretical lenses rather than through the introduction of new sources.

The analytical approach of this chapter has been deliberate. Rather than centering exclusion as the primary object of analysis, it has focused on enactment—on what Black clergywomen are already doing when institutional permission is no longer a precondition for leadership. This shift reframes Black clergywomen not as aspirants awaiting ecclesial inclusion but as authoritative practitioners whose ministries already shape spiritual life, moral discourse, and communal formation within public institutions. What has been demonstrated here is not merely a shift in institutional location but a reconstitution of vocation itself—how call is lived, sustained, and authorized under conditions of constraint.

Using Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography, this chapter has shown that vocational coherence is not an abstract theological category but an embodied reality. Across narratives, the difference between church and chaplaincy registers somatically: vigilance versus

ease, bracing versus breath, contraction versus spaciousness. These sensory and bodily registers function not as illustrative detail but as analytic signals, revealing where authority is contested or presumed and where leadership is tolerated or trusted.

The autoethnographic anchor traced how early spiritual wonder gave way to repeated encounters with institutional constraints, and how those constraints lodged in the body through silence, erasure, and conditional affirmation. The transition into chaplaincy marked not an abandonment of ministry but a reclamation of it—one in which the body no longer had to shrink to serve. When read alongside the testimonies of other Black clergywomen, this narrative becomes representative rather than exceptional. Across institutional types and career stages, participants described similar experiences of relief, alignment, and renewed vocational clarity upon entering chaplaincy roles.

Importantly, this chapter has not romanticized chaplaincy as a space free of power or harm. Higher education remains a contested terrain shaped by racial capitalism, political backlash, bureaucratic constraints, and institutional self-interest. Chaplains navigate surveillance, tokenization, and exhaustion, and their authority is real but not unlimited. Yet the nature of constraint is meaningfully different. In chaplaincy, the fundamental legitimacy of women's leadership is not the subject of theological dispute. Authority may be monitored, but it is not structurally prohibited. That distinction is decisive.

The collective ministerial logics traced here—relational authority, vocational home-place, and moral-theological institutional presence—are not aspirational ideals. They are operational patterns that recur across narratives and settings. They shape how chaplains pray in public, respond to crises, sit with students in pain, and intervene—sometimes quietly, sometimes

forcefully—in institutional processes that affect vulnerable lives. These practices generate theological knowledge; they do not merely illustrate it.

Taken together, the evidence in this chapter supports the dissertation’s central claim: higher education chaplaincy is not simply where Black clergywomen go when ecclesial doors close. It is a place where they are already constructing alternative ecclesial futures—futures grounded in relational authority, embodied care, ethical accountability, and public theology. Chaplaincy is not the absence of church; it is one of the places where church is being reimaged in practice. Taken together, these findings directly address the dissertation’s central research questions by demonstrating how Black clergywomen enact authority, sustain ministry, and cultivate vocational coherence outside patriarchal ecclesial authorization.

This chapter, therefore, functions as an empirical–analytic synthesis. It shows what is already happening.

What remains is to ask what this reality requires.

Vocational Futurity and Liberatory Imagination: What Chaplaincy Makes Possible

This section shifts from analysis to constructive theological imagination, tracing how chaplaincy reshapes vocational futures for Black clergywomen and makes possible forms of ministry not confined to inherited ecclesial scripts.

If this chapter has demonstrated that higher education chaplaincy functions as a present-tense site of liberatory ministry for Black clergywomen, this final analytic section turns toward the future that such practice makes possible. The question is no longer only where Black clergywomen minister but also how chaplaincy reshapes the meaning of vocation itself—what counts as faithfulness, how authority is discerned, and what kinds of ministerial futures become imaginable once patriarchal containment is no longer treated as normative.

What emerges here is not a hopeful appendix to the argument but its eschatological horizon. Chaplaincy reveals a future forged under constraint yet oriented toward life: a vocational imagination that rejects inherited grammars equating legitimacy with endurance, suffering with sanctification, and obedience with silence. In chaplaincy, Black clergywomen enact a different vocational logic—one that prioritizes coherence over access, survival over sacrifice, and generativity over recognition. This logic does not merely accommodate women's leadership; it reconstitutes the purpose of ministry itself.

From Endurance to Coherence: A Womanist Rewriting of Vocation

In patriarchal ecclesial systems, vocation is often framed as a test of endurance. Women—especially Black women—are encouraged to remain faithful despite prolonged marginalization, delayed recognition, and repeated diminishment, with the promise that perseverance itself signals divine favor. Endurance becomes both proof of calling and a measure of moral worth.

Chaplaincy disrupts this theology at its core. Across narratives, participants described a moment—sometimes gradual, sometimes sudden—when they recognized that enduring harm was not synonymous with faithfulness. In chaplaincy, they encountered a vocational ethic that posed different questions: Can I live my call without shrinking? Can my ministry sustain life rather than consume it? Can my body remain intact while I serve? These questions mark a decisive shift from endurance to coherence.

Coherence here does not mean comfort or ease. Chaplaincy is demanding, emotionally taxing, and institutionally complex. Rather, coherence refers to alignment among call, labor, and embodied integrity. It reflects a Womanist insistence—articulated by theologians such as Delores Williams and Katie Cannon—that survival and quality of life are not peripheral theological

concerns but central moral criteria. In this light, chaplaincy becomes a site where vocation is evaluated not by how much one can withstand but by whether one can live truthfully and sustainably in response to God's call.

This reframing carries theological weight. It rejects sacrificial narratives that have historically justified the extraction of Black women's labor in the name of order or tradition. It affirms that God's call does not require women to remain in structures that deform them. Vocation is reclaimed not as a static role conferred by institutional gatekeepers but as a dynamic relationship between divine summons and embodied response.

The Collapse of Linear Vocational Scripts

A second dimension of vocational futurity emerges in the collapse of linear vocational scripts. Traditional ecclesial models often envision ministry as a single upward trajectory: call, ordination, pastoral appointment, and senior leadership. When women—particularly Black women—are blocked from this path, their vocational lives are framed as incomplete, deferred, or stalled.

Chaplaincy exposes the poverty of this imagination. Participants' narratives reveal vocational lives that are iterative rather than linear, marked by discernment, reconfiguration, and creative adaptation. Chaplaincy is not a deviation from "real" ministry but one of several legitimate sites for enacting ministry. For some women, it becomes a lifelong vocation; for others, it serves as a generative threshold that opens into teaching, community organizing, spiritual direction, or the creation of new faith-based initiatives.

Crucially, these movements are no longer reactive. Decisions are driven not by what the church will not allow but by what life, call, and justice require. As one participant reflected, "For the first time, my future isn't a workaround. It's a calling." In this sense, chaplaincy does not

narrow vocational horizons; it widens them, loosening the grip of inherited scripts that equate legitimacy with proximity to the pulpit.

This widening carries ecclesiological implications. It suggests that the future of ministry may not lie in repairing a single hierarchical pathway but in recognizing a multiplicity of vocational forms—many of which are already inhabited by Black women. Chaplaincy is one such form, destabilizing the assumption that ministry must be congregational to be theologically serious or socially consequential.

Grief as Theological Companion, Not Obstacle

Vocational futurity in this chapter is not imagined without grief. Participants' stories are threaded with sorrow over ecclesial futures foreclosed by sexism and patriarchy: churches they might have pastored, liturgical authority denied, and communal recognition withheld. Chaplaincy does not erase this grief, nor does it require its resolution as a condition for forward movement.

Instead, grief becomes a theological companion. It testifies to the depth of women's love for the Black Church and to the magnitude of what has been lost through exclusion. This grief is not nostalgia for power but a lament for a community that rejected its own gifts. In Womanist terms, it is a grief that names harm without surrendering to despair.

Importantly, this grief does not negate futurity; it shapes it. Participants described carrying ecclesial memory into chaplaincy—drawing on Black Church traditions of preaching, testimony, ritual, and communal ethics even as they practiced ministry elsewhere. Chaplaincy becomes a site of continuity and transformation, where what was learned in church is neither discarded nor romanticized but reworked under different conditions.

Holding together grief and possibility resists binary narratives of departure versus loyalty. It reframes vocational movement as a faithful refusal: a refusal to abandon one's call even when

the institution that formed it proves unwilling to receive it. In this way, chaplaincy offers a future that is honest about loss yet oriented toward life.

Generativity, Transmission, and the Ethics of Multiplying Home-Places

Another dimension of vocational futurity is generativity. Chaplaincy places Black clergywomen in sustained relationships with students and emerging leaders who are grappling with meaning, justice, and institutional trust. In these encounters, chaplains become transmitters of a reimagined vocational ethic.

Participants described mentoring students who feel called to ministry yet cannot reconcile that call with inherited ecclesial exclusions. Rather than steering them toward compliance or resignation, chaplains model discernment grounded in truth-telling and self-respect. They invite students to consider not only what they are called to do but also how and where they can live that call without reproducing harm.

Through teaching, mentoring, and accompaniment, chaplains cultivate vocational imaginations that reject equating faithfulness with suffering and affirm the legitimacy of alternative forms of ministry. This work is generative not because it produces replicas of chaplaincy but because it multiplies home-places: spaces where future leaders learn to connect spirituality with justice, authority with accountability, and care with structural critique.

In this sense, chaplaincy contributes to the future of ministry not only through what chaplains do but also through what they make imaginable. It becomes a seedbed for liberatory practice beyond the university's boundaries.

Futurity as Theological Claim, Not Optimism

Finally, this section insists that vocational futurity is neither a matter of optimism nor institutional prediction. It is a theological claim grounded in lived evidence. The future disclosed

here is already unfolding in the daily practices of Black clergywomen who minister with authority, integrity, and care, beyond patriarchal ecclesial control.

Chaplaincy shows that when women are permitted to lead without constant surveillance, ministry does not fracture—it flourishes. Communities are held, truth is named, and ethical imagination expands. This reality presses the church toward accountability. If liberatory ministry is already being enacted elsewhere, the question is not whether it is legitimate but whether ecclesial theology is willing to learn from it.

In this sense, chaplaincy is not peripheral to the future of ministry; it is prophetic of that future. It shows that vocation, when freed from patriarchal containment, becomes more responsive to the world's pain and possibilities. For Black clergywomen, this futurity is not abstract. It is embodied, practiced, and sustained conversation by conversation, ritual by ritual, act of care by act of care.

This chapter therefore ends not with resolution but with an invitation: to imagine ministry beyond inherited limits, to discern authority where it is already exercised, and to reckon honestly with what Black clergywomen's lives reveal about God, call, and the future of liberatory faithfulness.

From Practice to Judgement: Normative Theological Indictment and Generative Horizon

What emerges from this chapter is not merely an alternative model of ministry but a normative theological judgment on the ecclesial structures that made such an alternative necessary. The fact that Black clergywomen consistently exercise greater authority, embody greater vocational coherence, and practice ministry with less bodily diminishment in higher education chaplaincy than in many Black Church contexts is not a neutral observation. It is diagnostic.

Chaplaincy is not proposed here as the normative form of Christian ministry but as a revelatory site that exposes the theological and institutional failures of patriarchal ecclesial systems.

This chapter has shown that spaces explicitly devoted to God's justice and liberation, in practice, have constrained Black women's callings more tightly than secular institutions organized around education, governance, and public life. That contradiction demands a theological reckoning. When Black women must relocate to live their call with integrity, the question is no longer whether chaplaincy "counts" as ministry. The question becomes what kind of church requires such departures for Black women to survive and flourish.

Read through Womanist theology. This is a matter of life and death, not metaphor. As Delores Williams insists, theological systems that normalize Black women's suffering in the name of order, tradition, or sacrifice have already betrayed the God they claim to serve. The suffering documented here is not redemptive. It is extractive. It disciplines bodies into silence, constricts imagination, and trains women to equate endurance with faithfulness.

Chaplaincy stands in sharp contrast—not because it abandons theology, but because it enacts it differently. In chaplaincy, ministry is measured not by how much harm one can endure, but by the capacity to generate care, truth, and communal repair. This contrast positions chaplaincy as both a refuge and a rebuke. It is a refuge, offering Black clergywomen space to breathe, lead, and belong. It is a rebuke, because its very functionality exposes the theological inadequacy of ecclesial systems that demand women's diminishment as proof of faithfulness.

At the same time, this chapter resists any reading that frames chaplaincy as a rejection of the Black Church. The women whose lives animate this study remain deeply formed by Black ecclesial traditions. Their preaching instincts, ritual vocabularies, pastoral sensibilities, and

commitments to justice are drawn from the very traditions that constrained them. Chaplaincy is not a repudiation of Black ecclesial inheritance; it is a re-siting of that inheritance in spaces where it can be practiced with greater fidelity to its liberatory claims.

The implication is not that chaplaincy replaces the church, but that it reveals what the church must confront. The practices documented here—authority exercised relationally rather than hierarchically, care rooted in embodiment rather than control, and leadership accountable to the most vulnerable rather than to a patriarchal order—are not foreign to Christian theology. They are deeply consonant with it. What chaplaincy exposes is not a new gospel but a different fidelity to an old one.

This chapter, therefore, presses ecclesiology toward accountability. The ministries documented here are not contingent on ecclesial permission to be real. They already are. The remaining question is whether theology will have the courage to tell the truth about them—and about the systems that made such truth necessary.

Chapter Conclusion and Transition: What Has Been Shown, and Why It Cannot Be Unseen

This chapter has made visible a form of ministry that has long been present yet insufficiently recognized. By closely attending to the lived, embodied practices of Black clergywomen in higher-education chaplaincy, this study shows that chaplaincy is not merely an adaptive response to ecclesial exclusion nor a diminished vocational alternative. It is a fully realized site of theological labor where authority, care, and institutional engagement are already exercised with coherence, accountability, and moral seriousness. This argument does not claim that chaplaincy is inherently liberatory, but that it becomes so when inhabited by Black clergywomen practicing justice-rooted, embodied ministry.

What has emerged across autoethnographic narratives, interview testimony, and sensory–spatial analysis is not a collection of isolated success stories but a patterned ministerial practice. Black clergywomen chaplains lead communities through crisis, sustain public rituals of meaning, accompany students amid precarity, and interpret institutional life through a justice-oriented theological lens. These practices are stable, repeatable, and publicly consequential. They operate under scrutiny and in moments of real moral weight.

This matters because it shifts the burden of explanation. The question is no longer whether Black clergywomen can exercise spiritual authority or sustain complex ministry. That question has been answered in practice. What remains unresolved is why ecclesial systems persist in treating women’s authority as conditional in church contexts, even though it is trusted elsewhere.

The embodied dimensions of this chapter sharpen that question. Participants consistently described bodily contraction in ecclesial spaces structured by patriarchal authority and bodily coherence in chaplaincy roles that presume their leadership. Within a Womanist theological framework, this bodily knowledge constitutes theological evidence—revealing where life is supported and where it is constrained. Embodiment here functions not as anecdote but as argument.

At the same time, this chapter has refused to present chaplaincy as a space of uncomplicated freedom. The women whose ministries anchor this analysis remain embedded in institutions shaped by racialized power, political constraints, and moral compromise. Liberation here is neither total nor final. It is practiced under constraint, negotiated daily, and sustained through discernment rather than triumph. That realism is not a weakness of the argument; it is part of its theological integrity.

What chaplaincy makes visible is not the absence of power but a different configuration of it. Authority is diffuse rather than singular, relational rather than hierarchical. Risk is redistributed rather than concentrated. This allows Black clergywomen to speak, act, and lead without constantly negotiating whether they are permitted to exist as authoritative ministers. That redistribution exposes the inadequacy of ecclesial frameworks that continue to justify women's exclusion by appealing to order, tradition, or complexity.

Crucially, this chapter has shown that chaplaincy is not a rejection of Black ecclesial life. It is a continuation of that life under conditions that allow greater integrity. The grief carried by participants—the loss of congregational futures foreclosed by patriarchy—remains real and unresolved. That grief names not personal failure but ecclesial refusal. It marks what has been lost not only for Black women but also for churches that have denied their own flourishing by rejecting women's full authority.

This chapter has therefore established that chaplaincy cannot be treated as marginal to theological reflection on ministry. It is not an exception that proves the rule of ecclesial authority; rather, it shows that the rule itself is insufficient. When justice-centered ministry flourishes outside the structures that claim exclusive authority over it, theology must respond—not by absorbing chaplaincy into existing categories, but by interrogating those categories.

This chapter has shown what is.

The final chapter turns to what that reality demands.

This chapter has demonstrated that higher education chaplaincy already serves as a site of coherent, authoritative, and justice-centered ministry for Black clergywomen. Through embodied practice, relational authority, and institutional engagement, chaplaincy reveals not only where ministry is happening but also how it is sustained without recourse to patriarchal ecclesial

authorization. These findings do not merely expand the map of ministerial possibility; they destabilize inherited assumptions about where and how ecclesial authority resides.

The question that now drives the dissertation forward is not whether this ministry is legitimate—it is—but what theological revisions are required when legitimacy is already being enacted beyond traditional ecclesial structures. If Black clergywomen are exercising pastoral authority, moral governance, and communal leadership with integrity outside congregational hierarchies, then ecclesiology itself must reckon with this reality.

Chapter Four directly engages this reckoning. Moving from empirical analysis to constructive theology, it asks how ecclesiology must be reimagined in light of Black women's lived ministry—particularly regarding authority, ordination, vocation, and the church's responsibility to the bodies it has historically constrained. The task ahead is not to grant retroactive recognition but to tell the truth about what Black clergywomen's ministries already reveal about God, call, and the future of liberatory faithfulness.

Chapter Four: Chaplaincy, Ecclesiology, and the Future of Black Women's Ministry

Chapter Purpose and Constructive Orientation: When Ministry Flourishes Beyond the Church

The preceding chapters of this dissertation have traced a consistent and unsettling pattern: Black clergywomen who experience sustained constraint, marginalization, and exclusion within Black Church leadership structures often encounter greater vocational coherence, institutional authority, and embodied alignment within higher education chaplaincy. Chapters One and Two demonstrated that this pattern is not incidental or episodic but structurally produced through the convergence of patriarchy, biblical literalism, respectability politics, and racialized institutional power. Chapter Three moved beyond diagnosis to practice, documenting how Black clergywomen chaplains are already enacting a coherent, justice-oriented form of ministry within contemporary public institutions—exercising authority, providing care, and shaping moral life without patriarchal legitimation. If Chapter Three demonstrated that Black clergywomen are already practicing coherent, justice-oriented ministry within higher education chaplaincy, this chapter asks what such practice demands of ecclesiology, vocational theology, and institutional imagination.

This chapter takes the next analytic step. If Black clergywomen are practicing robust, theologically grounded ministry outside congregational structures, what does that reality demand of ecclesiology, vocational theology, and institutional imagination? What does it mean for the church when some of the most coherent expressions of Black women's ministry are flourishing beyond the very institutions that claim to steward Christian leadership? And what becomes visible when chaplaincy is no longer treated as a marginal or compensatory vocational path, but as a primary site of ecclesial innovation?

These questions cannot be answered by returning to debates about women's ordination or by expanding inclusion rhetoric within existing ecclesial frameworks. Nor can they be resolved by interpreting chaplaincy merely as "applied pastoral care" or professionalized religious service. Instead, they require a constructive theological reckoning with the fact that ministry is already being faithfully practiced beyond the boundaries of ecclesial permission, and that such practice exposes the inadequacy of inherited ecclesiologies shaped by patriarchal authority structures rather than by the lived demands of care, justice, and communal flourishing.

This chapter therefore argues that higher education chaplaincy, as practiced by Black clergywomen, functions as a *de facto* ecclesial space: a site where proclamation, pastoral care, ritual leadership, and moral governance occur publicly and consequentially, even in the absence of formal ecclesial sanction. This is not a claim that chaplaincy replaces the church, nor that universities should be romanticized as morally neutral or spiritually superior institutions. Rather, it is a claim that chaplaincy reveals something crucial about the church's current theological limits—particularly its inability or unwillingness to receive Black women's authority without containment or diminishment.

The central constructive claim of this chapter is that chaplaincy exposes ecclesial failure more than clergywomen's deficiency. When Black women are able to exercise sustained ministerial authority, articulate public theology, and practice justice-centered care in higher education contexts, the contrast throws congregational exclusion into sharper relief. The issue is no longer whether Black clergywomen are called, prepared, or capable. The issue is whether ecclesial structures shaped by patriarchy can recognize and steward the forms of ministry already unfolding in their midst—and beyond their walls.

This chapter thus reframes vocational movement into chaplaincy not as departure, loss, or compromise, but as faithful relocation. Drawing on participants' narratives and the embodied analysis developed through Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography, this chapter challenges dominant vocational hierarchies that equate congregational leadership with "real ministry" and treat other forms of ministerial labor as secondary or derivative. For the Black clergywomen in this study, chaplaincy emerges not as an abandonment of call, but as a site where call can be practiced with integrity, coherence, and diminished compulsory shrinking.

Importantly, this argument does not depend on idealizing chaplaincy or minimizing its constraints. As Chapter Three demonstrated, higher education remains a contested institutional terrain shaped by racial capitalism, political backlash, bureaucratic surveillance, and interest convergence. Chaplains navigate donor pressure, administrative caution, and the emotional weight of student suffering, often while serving as symbolic representatives of institutional goodness.²¹³ Yet these constraints differ qualitatively from those imposed by ecclesial patriarchy. Where church structures often deny Black women's authority outright—treating their leadership as theologically illegitimate—academic institutions manage, monitor, and negotiate that authority. The difference between prohibition and management matters. It creates space, however constrained, for ministry to be practiced publicly rather than perpetually defended.

This chapter therefore engages ecclesiology not as an abstract doctrinal system but as a lived institutional reality—one that authorizes some bodies while disciplining others, and that reveals its theological commitments through practice as much as proclamation. Following Womanist theological commitments to embodied knowledge and lived wisdom, this chapter

²¹³ Derrick A. Bell Jr., "Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma," *Harvard Law Review* 93, no. 3 (1980): 523.

takes seriously the fact that the body often knows institutional truth before theology names it. The recurring sensory register identified in Chapter Three—breath versus bracing, ease versus vigilance, spaciousness versus contraction—functions here as theological data rather than illustrative detail.²¹⁴ When Black clergywomen repeatedly report greater embodied alignment in chaplaincy than in church leadership, the pattern demands ecclesiological interpretation.

The chapter proceeds by drawing out the implications of this pattern across three interrelated domains. First, it interrogates inherited ecclesiologies that locate legitimate ministry almost exclusively within congregational structures, exposing how such frameworks fail to account for ministry already occurring beyond ecclesial sanction. Second, it reconstructs a theology of authority grounded not in patriarchal gatekeeping but in relational accountability, ethical responsibility, and communal trust—an authority model already enacted by Black women chaplains. Third, it reframes vocation itself, challenging narratives that cast movement away from congregational leadership as spiritual failure and offering instead a Womanist account of discernment, survival, and faithful relocation.

In doing so, this chapter does not propose a new blueprint for church reform, nor does it suggest that chaplaincy should become the normative model for all ministry. Rather, it insists that any future-oriented ecclesiology must reckon with the ministry Black women are already practicing without permission. To ignore chaplaincy's significance is to continue misnaming exclusion as individual preference and to preserve vocational hierarchies that no longer reflect where theological life and leadership are actually unfolding.

²¹⁴ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 79.

Ultimately, this chapter contends that chaplaincy represents not the erosion of ecclesial life but one of its most generative frontiers. In higher education chaplaincy, Black clergywomen are practicing a form of ministry that integrates care, justice, public theology, and institutional critique—often with greater coherence than is possible within patriarchal congregational systems. Their leadership exposes the fragility of ecclesiologies that require women’s diminishment in order to function and points toward a theological future in which authority is measured not by permission granted but by life sustained.

What is at stake, then, is not whether chaplaincy can be understood as “church-like,” but whether the church can recognize ministry when it no longer controls its terms. The chapters that follow take up this challenge, arguing that the future of Black women’s ministry—and perhaps the future of ecclesial imagination itself—depends on our willingness to learn from the spaces where liberation is already being practiced.

What Chapter Three Established: Analytic Ground for Constructive Reckoning

Before advancing the constructive ecclesiological and vocational claims that frame this chapter, it is necessary to clarify what Chapter Three has already demonstrated and what, as a result, this chapter assumes rather than reargues. This section functions as an analytic hinge between empirical enactment and theological interpretation. Its purpose is not to rehearse narrative data or reintroduce theoretical frameworks, but to make explicit the scope and implications of the findings already established, thereby stabilizing the claims that follow.

Chapter Three marked a decisive turn in the dissertation’s analytic trajectory. Whereas Chapters One and Two diagnosed the historical, theological, and institutional conditions that have constrained Black clergywomen’s access to ecclesial authority, Chapter Three shifted attention from causation to practice. Rather than asking whether higher education chaplaincy

could function as a liberatory vocational home-place, it examined how chaplaincy is already being practiced by Black clergywomen across institutional contexts. The central analytic move of that chapter was to treat chaplaincy not as an alternative career outcome, but as a patterned site of ministerial enactment—observable, interpretable, and theologically meaningful.²¹⁵

What emerged was not a set of isolated success stories or individual adaptations, but a coherent ministerial logic that recurred across narratives, roles, and institutional settings. This coherence is crucial. Without it, the constructive claims advanced in the present chapter could be dismissed as idiosyncratic, aspirational, or normatively inflated. With it, chaplaincy becomes a legitimate object of ecclesiological and vocational analysis rather than a marginal exception.²¹⁶

Three analytic findings from Chapter Three form the necessary groundwork for this chapter's argument.

Authority Without Patriarchal Gatekeeping

First, Chapter Three established that Black clergywomen chaplains exercise real, consequential authority without reliance on patriarchal gatekeeping mechanisms that have historically governed ecclesial leadership. Participants' narratives consistently contrasted congregational contexts—where authority was mediated through male senior pastors, denominational hierarchies, and gendered expectations of submission—with chaplaincy contexts in which authority was presumed as part of the role itself. This presumption did not erase race or gender, nor did it eliminate surveillance or institutional constraint. It did, however, alter the baseline question from “Are you allowed to lead?” to “How will you lead?”²¹⁷

²¹⁵ Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 185.

²¹⁶ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 252.

²¹⁷ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 161.

This distinction is not merely rhetorical. Authority in chaplaincy was evidenced through practice rather than title alone. Participants described being entrusted with responsibilities that required moral judgment, theological interpretation, and public leadership: presiding over rituals following student deaths, advising senior administrators during crises, accompanying communities through racial trauma, and serving as ethical interlocutors in moments of institutional uncertainty. These tasks reflect functional authority—the capacity to shape meaning, guide response, and hold communal life together—rather than symbolic inclusion or provisional access.²¹⁸

At the same time, Chapter Three was careful not to romanticize this authority. Participants named donor pressure, administrative caution, and institutional surveillance as persistent realities. Chaplaincy authority was often monitored, sometimes constrained, and occasionally contested. Yet these constraints differed qualitatively from those experienced in ecclesial settings. In congregational contexts, authority was frequently denied at the level of theological legitimacy; in higher education, it was more often managed through bureaucratic and political mechanisms. The difference between prohibition and management is analytically significant. The former negates authority outright; the latter acknowledges it while attempting to shape its expression.²¹⁹

This finding destabilizes inherited assumptions about how authority functions in ministry. If Black clergywomen are exercising sustained, visible, and trusted authority in chaplaincy contexts without ecclesial sanction, then authority cannot be reduced to ordination status, congregational office, or male legitimation. Authority, as practiced here, emerges relationally and ethically—through trust cultivated over time, responsibility borne in moments of vulnerability,

²¹⁸ Wimberly, *African American Pastoral Care*, 121.

²¹⁹ Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, 20.

and accountability to diverse publics. This insight underwrites the constructive work of Chapter Four, which reexamines authority not as permission granted but as responsibility enacted.²²⁰

Chaplaincy as Vocational Home-Place

Second, Chapter Three established chaplaincy as a vocational home-place for Black clergywomen—not in the sense of comfort or safety, but in the sense of inhabitable integrity. Drawing on Womanist theological commitments and bell hooks’ articulation of home-place, the chapter treated participants’ embodied descriptions as analytic data rather than affective embellishment. Repeated references to breathing differently, shoulders dropping, reduced self-monitoring, and diminished anticipatory vigilance were interpreted as indicators of a shift in the conditions under which ministry was practiced.²²¹

These bodily shifts did not signal the absence of strain. Participants consistently described chaplaincy as emotionally demanding, politically complex, and often isolating. Higher education emerged as a contested institutional terrain shaped by racialized labor extraction, interest convergence, and public scrutiny. Yet participants distinguished between two kinds of burden: the burden of labor aligned with call, and the burden of defending one’s right to exist as a leader. Chaplaincy was experienced as home-place because it reduced the latter, even when the former intensified.²²²

This distinction reframes vocational movement in critical ways. Rather than interpreting chaplaincy as a retreat from “real ministry” or as a compromise necessitated by ecclesial exclusion, Chapter Three positioned it as a site of vocational coherence—a place where Black clergywomen could practice ministry without compulsory shrinking. This reframing is essential

²²⁰ Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 96.

²²¹ hooks, *Yearning*, 41.

²²² Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 87.

for the constructive argument that follows. Without it, movement away from congregational leadership risks being read through moralized narratives of failure or accommodation. With it, chaplaincy becomes legible as an ethically discerned relocation shaped by structural constraint and theological integrity.²²³

Importantly, Chapter Three resisted universalizing this experience. Not all chaplaincy roles were identical, and not all institutional contexts were equally supportive. Yet the recurrence of similar bodily and vocational descriptions across diverse settings indicated a patterned phenomenon rather than an exceptional one. The body, in this analysis, functioned as an archive of institutional truth—registering where leadership was tolerated, contested, or trusted before such realities were fully articulated cognitively.²²⁴ This methodological commitment grounds Chapter Four’s ecclesiological inquiry in lived experience rather than abstract ideal.

Moral and Theological Governance in Public Institutions

Third, Chapter Three demonstrated that Black clergywomen chaplains function as moral and theological governors within higher education institutions. Although chaplains rarely hold formal policy authority, participants consistently described occupying a distinctive interpretive role that shaped how institutions understood themselves in moments of crisis. They served as translators between bureaucratic language and human suffering, resisting tendencies toward euphemism, abstraction, and reputational management. Through ritual leadership, advisory presence, and sustained accompaniment, chaplains influenced institutional responses even when they could not determine outcomes.²²⁵

²²³ Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 133.

²²⁴ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 79.

²²⁵ Doris Kieser, “Chaplaincy as Public Theology,” *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 27, no. 2 (2017): 5.

This governance role complicates narrow definitions of ministry that equate leadership with hierarchical control. Participants' authority operated through presence, interpretation, and ethical insistence rather than command. They shaped institutional memory by determining what was named, what was grieved, and what was remembered. In doing so, they enacted a form of public theology that was both pastoral and political, intimate and institutional.²²⁶

This finding carries significant ecclesiological implications. If chaplains are performing functions traditionally associated with ecclesial life—proclamation, pastoral care, ritual leadership, moral interpretation—outside congregational structures, then ecclesiology must grapple with where and how church is understood to happen. Chapter Three did not claim chaplaincy as “church by another name.” Rather, it showed that chaplaincy exposes the insufficiency of ecclesiologies that locate legitimate ministry exclusively within congregational or ordination-bound frameworks.²²⁷

From Demonstration to Reckoning

Taken together, these findings establish that higher education chaplaincy is not peripheral to the future of ministry, nor is it merely adjacent to ecclesial life. Black clergywomen are already practicing ministry that is authoritative, public, and theologically substantive in chaplaincy contexts. The question that follows is not whether such practice can be justified after the fact, but what its existence reveals about the theological frameworks that have rendered it anomalous.²²⁸

This chapter proceeds from that recognition. It does not introduce new empirical data, nor does it seek to generalize chaplaincy as a universal solution to ministerial marginalization.

²²⁶ Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 23.

²²⁷ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 121.

²²⁸ Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,” 1241.

Instead, it takes seriously the implications of what has already been shown. If Black women's ministry flourishes more fully in chaplaincy than in congregational leadership structures, then ecclesiology must be reexamined—not to accommodate chaplaincy as an exception, but to interrogate the assumptions about authority, vocation, and legitimacy that make such flourishing appear surprising in the first place.²²⁹

The sections that follow move from analytic demonstration to constructive reckoning. They ask what it means for the church when ministry exceeds its control, how authority must be reimagined when it is exercised without permission, and how vocation can be understood faithfully when survival, integrity, and embodied coherence are treated as theological criteria rather than liabilities. What Chapter Three established empirically, this chapter takes up theologically—without apology and without retreat.²³⁰

Ecclesiology Under Pressure: When Ministry Exceeds the Church

The empirical findings synthesized in the previous section place inherited ecclesiologies under significant strain. If Black clergywomen are exercising sustained, recognizable, and trusted forms of ministry within higher education chaplaincy—while encountering systematic constraint within congregational leadership structures—then the problem cannot be reduced to individual vocational preference, lack of preparation, or failure of perseverance. Rather, the problem is ecclesiological. Specifically, the forms of ecclesiology that continue to govern Black Church life prove inadequate for receiving, authorizing, and sustaining the ministries Black women are already practicing.

²²⁹ Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 56.

²³⁰ Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, 3.

This section argues that higher education chaplaincy exposes a crisis in ecclesiological imagination. That crisis does not emerge because chaplaincy imitates the church too closely, nor because it abandons ecclesial commitments altogether. It emerges because chaplaincy reveals that many of the practices the church claims as central to its identity—pastoral care, proclamation, ritual leadership, moral interpretation, and communal accompaniment—are flourishing beyond congregational control. The question this raises is not whether chaplaincy should be considered “church,” but whether inherited ecclesiologies have become too narrowly tethered to institutional forms that no longer reflect where ministry is actually happening.²³¹

Congregational Ecclesiology and Its Assumptions

Most dominant ecclesiologies, including those operative within the Black Church, remain congregationally centered. They presume the local congregation as the primary site of ecclesial life and the pulpit as the central locus of ministerial authority. Ordination, denominational recognition, and congregational office function as the principal mechanisms through which legitimacy is conferred and leadership is authorized. These assumptions are so deeply embedded that they often go unnamed, appearing instead as common sense rather than theological construction.

Within such frameworks, ministry exercised outside congregational structures is frequently interpreted as supplemental, provisional, or derivative. Chaplaincy, in particular, is often framed as a specialized form of pastoral care that supports the “real” work of the church rather than constituting a primary site of ecclesial practice in its own right. This framing relies on a spatial theology that equates church with congregation and treats other institutional locations—

²³¹ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 87.

hospitals, prisons, universities, military contexts—as secondary or peripheral arenas of religious activity.

Yet this spatial theology is not neutral. It reflects historical patterns of power that have privileged certain bodies, voices, and institutional forms while marginalizing others. As Willie James Jennings has argued, Christian institutions have long been shaped by a distorted vision of belonging that ties theological legitimacy to specific configurations of land, authority, and identity.²³² Within such configurations, Black women's leadership is frequently rendered anomalous—not because it lacks theological grounding, but because it disrupts inherited alignments between authority, masculinity, and institutional control.

The findings of Chapter Three indicate that these congregational assumptions are no longer tenable. Black clergywomen are not merely offering care adjacent to ecclesial life; they are enacting ministry that performs many of the church's core functions. They preach—not always from pulpits, but through public moral interpretation. They pastor—not within membership rolls, but through sustained accompaniment. They preside over ritual—not as guests, but as recognized leaders. They exercise oversight—not through formal polity, but through moral governance. To dismiss these practices as non-ecclesial is to mistake form for substance.²³³

Chaplaincy as De Facto Ecclesial Practice

The claim here is not that chaplaincy should be reclassified as church, nor that universities have become replacement congregations. Rather, the claim is that chaplaincy

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Wimberly, *African American Pastoral Care*, 121.

functions as a de facto ecclesial practice: it performs ecclesial work without ecclesial sanction. This distinction matters. It allows for theological clarity without institutional conflation.

Historically, ecclesiology has always been contested at the boundaries—where ministry occurs beyond formal structures and where authority is exercised without clear institutional authorization. Black theology, in particular, has long emphasized that the life of the church cannot be reduced to sanctioned spaces or approved leadership roles. James Cone’s insistence that the church must be located where God is actively engaged in liberation rather than where institutional power is preserved remains instructive here.²³⁴ If God’s liberative work is evident in practices of care, truth-telling, and communal survival, then ecclesiology must be responsive to those sites, even when they unsettle inherited forms.

The practices documented in Chapter Three demonstrate that chaplaincy is one such site. Black women chaplains are not improvising ministry in the absence of church; they are practicing ministry shaped by theological formation, pastoral discipline, and ethical accountability. What distinguishes chaplaincy from congregational leadership is not the absence of ecclesial function, but the absence of patriarchal gatekeeping. Authority in chaplaincy is recognized through role, relationship, and responsibility rather than mediated through male approval or doctrinal containment.²³⁵

This difference exposes an uncomfortable truth: when ecclesiology is overly identified with congregational form, it risks mistaking institutional continuity for theological fidelity. The flourishing of Black women’s ministry in chaplaincy contexts suggests that the problem is not

²³⁴ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 121.

²³⁵ Kieser, “Chaplaincy as Public Theology,” 5.

the location of ministry, but the church's narrowing of where it is willing to recognize God's work.

Authority, Legitimacy, and the Limits of Ordination-Centered Ecclesiology

One of the most significant pressures chaplaincy places on ecclesiology concerns authority. In many ecclesial frameworks, ordination functions as the primary marker of ministerial legitimacy. While ordination can serve as a meaningful communal recognition of call, it has also operated historically as a mechanism of exclusion—particularly for women and for those whose theological commitments challenge dominant norms.

The narratives analyzed in Chapter Three demonstrate that ordination alone does not guarantee authority, nor does its absence negate it. Several participants held ordination credentials yet experienced persistent delegitimation within congregational settings. Conversely, those same women exercised unquestioned authority in chaplaincy roles that did not rely on ordination for validation. This discrepancy reveals a disjunction between formal recognition and functional authority.²³⁶

Womanist theologians have long critiqued models of authority that privilege abstraction over lived wisdom and hierarchical control over relational accountability. Katie Cannon's insistence that moral authority emerges from embodied ethical practice rather than institutional position provides a critical lens for interpreting chaplaincy authority.²³⁷ In chaplaincy, authority is conferred by communities in need—students seeking counsel, administrators seeking moral guidance, and institutions seeking meaning in moments of crisis. This authority is situational, relational, and accountable, even as it remains structurally constrained.

²³⁶ Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, 20.

²³⁷ Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 96.

Ecclesiologies that cannot account for such authority risk becoming self-referential. They protect institutional boundaries at the expense of recognizing where ministry is actually being exercised. In this sense, chaplaincy does not threaten the church; it exposes the fragility of ecclesiologies that equate legitimacy with control.

The Exposure of Ecclesial Failure, Not Clergywomen's Deficiency

Perhaps the most consequential implication of chaplaincy's flourishing is the way it reframes the narrative of women's exclusion from congregational leadership. When Black women are able to lead effectively, ethically, and visibly in chaplaincy contexts, claims that their marginalization in the church stems from lack of readiness, theological clarity, or pastoral skill become increasingly untenable.

Instead, the contrast reveals ecclesial failure. It suggests that congregational structures—particularly those shaped by patriarchal theology and respectability politics—have failed to steward the gifts entrusted to Black clergywomen. Delores Williams' Womanist critique of sacrificial theology is instructive here: when women are repeatedly asked to sacrifice their call, integrity, or well-being for the sake of institutional stability, the problem lies not with women's faithfulness but with the theology that demands such sacrifice.²³⁸

Chaplaincy exposes this failure not through critique alone, but through practice. The ministries documented in Chapter Three demonstrate what becomes possible when women are not required to diminish themselves to be tolerated. The issue, then, is not whether chaplaincy should be considered a legitimate form of ministry, but why the church has made such legitimacy so difficult to achieve within its own structures.

²³⁸ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 161.

Ecclesiology Beyond Congregational Control

The pressure chaplaincy places on ecclesiology ultimately concerns control. Congregational ecclesiologies often function, implicitly if not explicitly, as mechanisms for regulating who may speak, lead, and represent God publicly. When ministry occurs outside those mechanisms—yet retains theological coherence and ethical depth—it challenges the assumption that control is necessary for faithfulness.

This challenge does not call for the abandonment of congregational life or the dissolution of ecclesial structures. Rather, it calls for an expansion of ecclesiological imagination. Ecclesiology must be able to name and affirm ministry that occurs in liminal, institutional, and public spaces—especially when such ministry emerges from communities historically excluded from ecclesial authority.

As M. Shawn Copeland has argued, bodies matter theologically because they bear the marks of history, power, and resistance.²³⁹ An ecclesiology attentive to embodiment must therefore reckon with the fact that Black women's bodies have often been disciplined, surveilled, and silenced within church structures, even as those same bodies are entrusted with care, leadership, and moral authority elsewhere. Chaplaincy makes this contradiction visible.

Toward an Ecclesiology Capable of Recognition

The argument advanced here is not that chaplaincy resolves ecclesial crisis, but that it reveals it. Chaplaincy shows that ministry can and does exceed the church's control, and that such excess is not necessarily disorder but may instead be a sign of the Spirit's work beyond institutional boundaries.

²³⁹ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 161.

If ecclesiology is to remain responsive to lived ministry rather than frozen in inherited forms, it must develop the capacity to recognize authority where it appears, even when it appears outside familiar structures. This recognition does not require ecclesiology to abandon tradition, but it does require it to interrogate which aspects of tradition have been shaped by patriarchy rather than by the gospel.

The sections that follow build on this pressure. Having shown that chaplaincy destabilizes congregationally bounded ecclesiologies, the chapter turns next to the question of authority itself—asking how authority might be reimagined when it is exercised without permission and sustained through responsibility rather than control.²⁴⁰

Reconfiguring Authority: From Permission to Responsibility

The ecclesiological pressure exposed by chaplaincy leads inexorably to a reconsideration of authority itself. If Black clergywomen are exercising sustained, trusted, and consequential leadership in chaplaincy contexts—without reliance on patriarchal legitimation—then authority can no longer be defined primarily as permission granted by ecclesial institutions. Instead, authority must be understood as responsibility enacted in relation to community, context, and moral demand. This section argues that chaplaincy reveals a reconfiguration of authority already underway—one that exposes the limits of inherited ecclesial models and gestures toward a more faithful account of ministerial leadership.²⁴¹

Authority as Permission: The Ecclesial Inheritance

Within many ecclesial frameworks, authority is imagined as something conferred: granted through ordination, ratified by denominational structures, and mediated through

²⁴⁰ Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, 3.

²⁴¹ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 87.

hierarchical recognition. This model presumes that authority precedes action—that one must first be authorized in order to lead. While such a framework can function as a mechanism of accountability, it has also historically operated as a gatekeeping system that privileges particular bodies, voices, and theological styles while excluding others.

For Black clergywomen, this permission-based model has rarely functioned neutrally. As earlier chapters demonstrated, women's authority within the Black Church has often been conditional, provisional, or revocable—extended only insofar as it does not disrupt patriarchal norms or challenge male leadership. Even when women are ordained, their authority is frequently constrained by informal surveillance practices, gendered expectations of demeanor, and theological narratives that frame women's leadership as exceptional rather than normative.²⁴²

This inheritance renders authority fragile. When authority depends on permission, it remains vulnerable to withdrawal. Leaders must continually perform legitimacy rather than exercise it. The result is a form of ministry marked by vigilance, self-monitoring, and anticipatory compliance. Chapter Three showed that such conditions exact a bodily and spiritual cost, often leading Black clergywomen to seek contexts where authority is less precarious.

Authority as Responsibility: Chaplaincy's Alternative Logic

Chaplaincy operates according to a different logic. Authority in chaplaincy does not begin with permission; it begins with responsibility. Chaplains are entrusted with care because there is care to be done. Their authority is activated by need rather than conferred by hierarchy. Students arrive in crisis. Institutions face moral rupture. Communities seek meaning amid loss. In these moments, chaplains are authorized by the demand itself.

²⁴² Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women ...: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 85.

This form of authority is neither anarchic nor individualistic. It is deeply relational and profoundly accountable. Chaplains are accountable to those they serve, to professional ethical standards, and to institutional contexts that shape the limits of their action. Yet their authority does not depend on ecclesial endorsement. It depends on the capacity to respond faithfully, interpret wisely, and remain present under pressure.

Participants described this authority not as empowerment granted from above, but as weight borne from within. They spoke of being *looked to* in moments of crisis, trusted with grief, and relied upon for moral clarity. Authority, in these accounts, was not something they claimed; it was something they were asked to carry. This shift—from claim to call, from permission to responsibility—marks the core reconfiguration chaplaincy makes visible.

Womanist Accounts of Authority and Moral Agency

Womanist theology provides a crucial interpretive framework for understanding this shift. Womanist ethicists have long rejected hierarchical models of authority that privilege abstraction, control, and domination over relational accountability and embodied wisdom. Katie Cannon's insistence that moral authority arises from lived ethical practice rather than institutional position offers a direct challenge to ecclesial models that equate leadership with office.²⁴³

Within this framework, authority is recognized through practice: through the capacity to sustain life, tell the truth about power, and act responsibly in contexts of constraint. Black women's authority has historically been exercised in precisely this way—often without recognition, often under surveillance, and often at great personal cost. Chaplaincy does not create this authority; it reveals it. By placing Black clergywomen in roles where responsibility is

²⁴³ Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 96.

explicit and trust is assumed, chaplaincy allows forms of authority long exercised informally to become visible and legitimate.

This visibility matters. When authority is recognized, it can be sustained. When it remains unofficial, it remains extractive—benefiting institutions without protecting leaders. Chaplaincy’s recognition of Black women’s authority therefore carries ethical significance, not merely vocational convenience.

Functional Authority and the Question of Legitimacy

The authority exercised by chaplains is best described as functional rather than formal. It is authority that works—that shapes outcomes, guides communities, and influences institutional response—even when it lacks the trappings of hierarchical control. Functional authority challenges ecclesial assumptions that legitimacy must be tied to formal recognition.

Participants described advising senior administrators, shaping institutional language around crises, and leading public rituals that defined communal meaning. These actions did not require ecclesial permission, yet they carried profound theological weight. They named suffering, articulated hope, and held institutions accountable to their stated values. Such work aligns closely with classic theological understandings of pastoral and prophetic ministry, even as it occurs outside congregational settings.²⁴⁴

If ministry that looks, feels, and functions like pastoral leadership is occurring without ecclesial authorization, then legitimacy cannot be reduced to institutional sanction. Chaplaincy disrupts the conflation of legitimacy with control by demonstrating that authority can be exercised responsibly without being owned institutionally.

²⁴⁴ Wimberly, *African American Pastoral Care*, 121.

Authority That Is Practiced but Not Named

One of the most revealing dynamics emerging from this study is the phenomenon of authority that is practiced but not named. Black clergywomen chaplains are often entrusted with leadership responsibilities that presuppose authority, even as that authority remains theologically under-articulated and institutionally unacknowledged.

This refusal to name authority carries cost. When authority is not named, it cannot be defended. When it is not defended, it becomes vulnerable to extraction and erasure. Institutions benefit from the labor of moral leadership while retaining the ability to deny its theological significance. This dynamic mirrors broader patterns in which Black women's leadership is relied upon in moments of crisis yet marginalized in moments of recognition.

Theologically, unnamed authority represents a failure of recognition. It signals an ecclesiology unable—or unwilling—to affirm leadership that does not conform to inherited forms. Chaplaincy makes this failure visible precisely because authority is exercised so clearly. The question becomes not whether authority exists, but why it remains so difficult for ecclesial structures to acknowledge it.

Authority, Embodiment, and the Refusal to Shrink

Authority is not exercised only cognitively or institutionally; it is borne bodily. Participants' descriptions of inhabiting chaplaincy roles with fuller breath, less vigilance, and greater coherence indicate that authority experienced as responsibility rather than permission is embodied differently. Bodies register where authority is trusted and where it is contested long before such dynamics are articulated theoretically.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁵ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 79.

In congregational contexts, Black clergywomen often described shrinking—modulating tone, appearance, and presence in order to remain acceptable. In chaplaincy, this compulsory shrinking was reduced. Their bodies were no longer the primary site of ecclesial anxiety. While institutional politics remained, the baseline conditions of leadership shifted. Authority could be exercised without the constant fear of revocation.

This embodied difference is not incidental. It reveals what is at stake in ecclesial refusal. When the church cannot recognize authority exercised by Black women, it does not merely misname leadership; it produces conditions that exhaust, constrain, and harm those called to lead.

Authority Without Illusion: The Boundary Case

It is important to state clearly that chaplaincy is not a utopia. Authority exercised within higher education remains shaped by racialized power, donor influence, bureaucratic surveillance, and institutional risk management. Chaplains are not immune to extraction, burnout, or marginalization. Recognition does not eliminate constraint.

Yet these constraints operate differently than in congregational settings. In chaplaincy, constraint tends to regulate expression rather than existence. Presence is assumed; negotiation concerns how authority is exercised, not whether it is permitted. This distinction matters. As Derrick Bell's concept of interest convergence helps explain, institutional tolerance does not negate authority—it contextualizes it.²⁴⁶

Naming this boundary prevents romanticization while preserving analytic clarity. Chaplaincy does not resolve the problem of authority; it reframes it. It shows that authority can be exercised meaningfully even under constraint, and that the refusal to recognize such authority is a theological failure rather than a vocational inevitability.

²⁴⁶ Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, 20.

Toward a Theology of Authority Adequate to Practice

The reconfiguration of authority revealed through chaplaincy does not require the abandonment of ecclesial structures or the rejection of ordination. It requires honesty about how authority actually functions. Authority emerges where responsibility is borne, where trust is sustained, and where moral clarity is exercised in the face of vulnerability.

If ecclesiology is to remain accountable to lived ministry rather than abstract ideals, it must be able to name this form of authority as real. Doing so does not undermine the church; it challenges the church to examine whether its mechanisms of recognition have become detached from the work of the Spirit.

The chapter now turns to vocation—asking how faithful calling can be discerned when authority is exercised outside traditional ecclesial pathways, and what it means to choose relocation over endurance when staying would require shrinking.

Faithful Relocation, Not Failure: Reframing Vocation Under Constraint

The reconfiguration of authority explored in the previous section necessitates a parallel reconfiguration of vocation. If authority can be exercised responsibly outside traditional ecclesial pathways, then vocational movement away from congregational ministry must be interpreted theologically rather than defensively. This section argues that the turn toward chaplaincy among Black clergywomen represents not vocational failure or compromise, but faithful relocation under structural constraint. Such relocation reflects discernment, integrity, and theological coherence in contexts where remaining would require shrinking.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁷ Smith, *Courage and Calling*, 96.

The Dominant Narrative of Leaving

Within many ecclesial communities, departure from congregational ministry is framed as loss. To leave the pulpit is to step away from “real ministry,” to abandon one’s calling, or to settle for a lesser form of service. This narrative is particularly potent for clergywomen, whose leadership is already marked as provisional or exceptional. When women exit congregational roles, their departure is often interpreted as confirmation of inadequacy rather than evidence of institutional failure.

This framing relies on a narrow vocational imagination that equates call with location. Vocation is treated as static and singular, tied to a specific institutional form rather than understood as dynamic and responsive to context. Such an imagination leaves little room for discernment under constraint. It assumes that faithfulness is measured by endurance rather than by integrity, and that staying is inherently more virtuous than leaving.

Chapter Three demonstrated that this narrative does not align with Black clergywomen’s lived experience. Participants did not describe their movement toward chaplaincy as abandonment, retreat, or resignation. Instead, they narrated it as a response—to exhaustion, to misalignment, to the cumulative cost of unrecognized authority. Their decisions emerged from discernment processes shaped by prayer, counsel, bodily awareness, and ethical clarity. To interpret these movements as failure is to impose a moral framework that ignores structural constraint.²⁴⁸

Faithful Relocation as Womanist Vocational Logic

Womanist theology offers a different vocational logic—one that centers survival, wholeness, and responsibility rather than sacrifice for its own sake. Delores Williams’ critique of

²⁴⁸ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 127.

redemptive suffering remains instructive here. When women are told that faithfulness requires enduring harm, exclusion, or diminishment, suffering is spiritualized rather than named as injustice.²⁴⁹ In such contexts, leaving becomes not a betrayal of call, but a refusal of theological distortion.

Faithful relocation names this refusal without shame. It affirms that vocation is not proven through endurance alone, but through alignment between call, capacity, and context. For Black clergywomen, whose ministries have often been sustained despite institutional hostility, relocation can represent a commitment to livable faithfulness rather than capitulation.

Participants' narratives consistently reflected this logic. They described chaplaincy as a space where their theological commitments could be enacted without constant self-negation. Their movement was not away from ministry, but toward coherence—toward a context where authority could be exercised responsibly and vocation could be inhabited fully. Faithful relocation thus emerges as a Womanist response to constrained ecclesial structures, grounded in survival as theological wisdom.²⁵⁰

Discernment Under Constraint

A critical feature of faithful relocation is that it occurs under constraint. Choices are not made in ideal conditions, but within landscapes shaped by patriarchy, racism, economic precarity, and vocational vulnerability. To frame vocational movement as purely elective or preference-driven obscures these realities.

Participants described discernment processes marked by ambivalence and grief as well as clarity. Many loved congregational ministry deeply. Their departure was not a rejection of the church, but an acknowledgment that remaining had become unsustainable. Bodily cues—chronic

²⁴⁹ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 165.

²⁵⁰ Harris, *Ecowomanism*, 67.

exhaustion, anxiety, diminished joy—featured prominently in their discernment, functioning as theological data rather than personal weakness.²⁵¹

Such discernment challenges dominant vocational theologies that privilege abstract notions of obedience over embodied truth. Frederick Buechner’s oft-cited definition of vocation as the place where “your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” gestures toward this integration, but Womanist accounts push further by insisting that gladness must be livable and hunger must not require self-erasure.²⁵² Faithful relocation honors discernment that takes bodies seriously as sites of theological knowledge.

Chaplaincy as Vocational Integrity

Chaplaincy emerges in this study not as a consolation prize, but as a context in which vocational integrity is restored. Participants described rediscovering joy in ministry, not because chaplaincy was easier, but because it allowed them to minister without constant negotiation of legitimacy. Their call—to accompany, to interpret, to lead ritual, to speak moral truth—remained intact. What changed was the institutional setting in which that call could be enacted.

This restoration of integrity is significant. Vocational integrity refers to the coherence between identity, call, and practice. When that coherence is fractured—by exclusion, surveillance, or enforced silence—ministry becomes dissonant. Chaplaincy, for many participants, repaired that fracture by aligning authority with responsibility and recognition with practice.

Importantly, this integrity did not depend on abandoning ecclesial commitments. Participants continued to draw on theological training, pastoral identity, and spiritual disciplines shaped by the church. Chaplaincy did not secularize their vocation; it recontextualized it. This

²⁵¹ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 89.

²⁵² Buechner, *Listening to Your Life*, 15.

distinction matters for resisting narratives that frame chaplaincy as “less theological” or “merely professional.” The ministries documented here remained deeply theological, even as they unfolded beyond congregational boundaries.²⁵³

The Moral Weight of Staying Versus Leaving

Reframing vocation also requires interrogating the moral weight assigned to staying. Within ecclesial discourse, perseverance is often valorized without sufficient attention to cost. Staying is framed as faithfulness; leaving is framed as weakness. Yet this binary collapses when staying requires ongoing diminishment or complicity with unjust structures.

Participants’ accounts suggest that leaving can be a morally serious act—one that names limits, refuses harm, and preserves the capacity to serve. Staying, by contrast, can sometimes function as compliance rather than courage. Faithful relocation disrupts this binary by insisting that vocation must be evaluated not only by duration, but by fruitfulness, sustainability, and truthfulness.

This reframing aligns with Womanist ethical commitments that prioritize life over institution. Katie Cannon’s emphasis on moral agency exercised within constraint underscores that ethical decisions are judged not by abstract ideals, but by their capacity to sustain human flourishing.²⁵⁴ From this perspective, vocational movement toward chaplaincy appears not as retreat, but as moral discernment enacted under pressure.

The Cost of Misnaming Vocation

Misnaming faithful relocation as failure carries consequence. When vocational movement is moralized as deficiency, it silences truth-telling and discourages discernment. It also absolves

²⁵³ Kieser, “Chaplaincy as Public Theology,” 11.

²⁵⁴ Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 104.

institutions of responsibility for the conditions that make staying untenable. The church, in such narratives, remains unexamined while individuals bear the weight of departure alone.

Chaplaincy exposes this misnaming by making visible what becomes possible when Black clergywomen are not required to defend their call continually. The flourishing documented in Chapter Three suggests that the issue is not a lack of vocation, but a lack of ecclesial capacity to receive it. Naming relocation as faithful therefore shifts accountability from individual clergywomen to the structures that constrained them.

Toward a Vocational Theology Adequate to Reality

A vocational theology adequate to the realities documented in this study must be able to account for movement, change, and refusal. It must honor discernment that responds to embodied knowledge and structural constraint. It must resist narratives that equate faithfulness with endurance alone.

Faithful relocation offers such an account. It names chaplaincy as a site where Black clergywomen can live their call without compulsory shrinking. It reframes vocational movement as ethical clarity rather than defeat. And it insists that vocation remains intact even when ecclesial structures prove unable to sustain it.

The next section turns from vocational reframing to institutional implication, asking what the Black Church loses when it cannot receive such vocation—and what higher education gains, often without fully reckoning with the cost borne by those who relocate.

Implications for the Black Church: What Is Lost When Vocation Cannot Be Received

The vocational relocations traced in this study do not occur in a vacuum. They are responses to ecclesial conditions that have rendered Black clergywomen's authority precarious, contested, or unsustainable within congregational leadership structures. While Sections III–V

have examined how chaplaincy exposes ecclesiological limitation, reconfigures authority, and reframes vocation, the question now turns outward: what does the Black Church lose when it cannot receive Black women's call? This section argues that the loss is not merely numerical or symbolic, but theological, pastoral, and institutional.²⁵⁵

From Retention to Reception

Discussions about women's leadership in the Black Church are often framed in terms of retention. When women leave congregational ministry, the question posed is typically, How do we get them back? This framing presumes that the primary issue is departure rather than reception. It treats women's absence as a problem of persistence or loyalty rather than as an index of institutional incapacity.

The findings of this study suggest a different diagnostic. Black clergywomen did not leave congregational ministry because they lacked commitment, theological depth, or vocational clarity. They left because their authority could not be received without qualification. Their leadership was tolerated but not trusted, visible but not secured. Retention discourse obscures this reality by focusing on outcome rather than condition.²⁵⁶

Reception, by contrast, asks whether the church possesses the theological and institutional capacity to recognize authority when it appears in forms that disrupt inherited norms. It asks whether leadership is welcomed only when it conforms to patriarchal expectations, or whether the church can be transformed by the leaders God sends. The vocational trajectories examined here suggest that, too often, the Black Church has struggled with this task.

²⁵⁵ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 152.

²⁵⁶ Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, 31.

The Cost of Conditional Authority

When authority is conditional, it produces instability. Black clergywomen frequently described congregational contexts in which their leadership was continually adjudicated—scrutinized for tone, constrained in scope, and dependent on male validation. Such conditions require constant self-monitoring and emotional labor, diverting energy from pastoral care, theological imagination, and communal leadership.

The cost of this conditionality is cumulative. Over time, it erodes trust, diminishes creativity, and narrows the church's capacity to respond to complex pastoral realities. When leaders must spend disproportionate energy defending their legitimacy, the community loses access to their full gifts. What is lost is not only women's leadership, but the church's ability to be led well.²⁵⁷

This dynamic also distorts theological formation. When women's authority is treated as exceptional or provisional, congregations internalize a truncated vision of leadership—one that confuses masculinity with competence and hierarchy with faithfulness. Such distortions have implications not only for clergywomen, but for congregational imagination more broadly.

Pastoral Loss and the Withholding of Care

One of the most significant losses the Black Church incurs through the marginalization of women's authority is pastoral. The participants in this study consistently demonstrated exceptional capacity for accompaniment, moral interpretation, and ritual leadership. These capacities did not emerge suddenly in chaplaincy; they were cultivated through years of congregational ministry, theological training, and lived experience.

²⁵⁷ Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women...*, 126.

When such leaders relocate vocationally, congregations lose pastors who are often deeply attuned to the complexities of trauma, grief, and institutional harm. The loss is particularly acute in contexts where congregations themselves are navigating generational change, declining trust, and public scrutiny. The irony is stark: at precisely the moment when churches require adaptive, relational leadership, they have often constrained or dismissed those best equipped to provide it.²⁵⁸

This loss is not mitigated by symbolic inclusion or representational gestures. Visibility without authority does not sustain pastoral leadership. Nor does it compensate for the erosion of trust that occurs when leaders are repeatedly asked to prove their worth.

Theological Loss: When Authority Is Misrecognized

Beyond pastoral consequence lies theological loss. Ecclesiology is not merely descriptive; it shapes how communities understand God's action in the world. When the church cannot recognize authority exercised by Black women, it risks misnaming the work of the Spirit.

Black theology has long insisted that God's liberative activity is often disclosed through those pushed to the margins. James Cone's insistence that theology must begin with the experiences of the oppressed was not merely a methodological claim, but an ecclesiological one.²⁵⁹ If God speaks through marginalized voices, then the church's inability to receive those voices represents not neutrality, but theological failure.

The vocational flourishing of Black clergywomen in chaplaincy contexts intensifies this question. When ministry marked by integrity, depth, and authority is recognized outside the church but resisted within it, the issue is not the absence of call but the misrecognition of it. The church loses theological clarity when it cannot discern where God is already at work.

²⁵⁸ Cooper-White, *Shared Wisdom*, 76.

²⁵⁹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 24.

Inclusion Without Transformation

In recent decades, many Black churches have adopted the language of inclusion to address gender inequity. While such language may reflect genuine desire for change, it often stops short of transformation. Inclusion frequently operates by adding women into existing structures without interrogating the structures themselves.

This approach leaves core dynamics intact. Authority remains male-centered. Decision-making remains hierarchical. Women are welcomed to participate but not to reconfigure. As a result, inclusion can function as containment rather than liberation—expanding visibility while preserving control.²⁶⁰

The vocational relocations examined in this study suggest that inclusion without transformation is insufficient. Black clergywomen did not leave because they were invisible; they left because their authority could not be sustained. Transformation would require not simply inviting women into leadership, but reshaping ecclesial practices of recognition, trust, and accountability.

Institutional Memory and the Cost of Attrition

Another loss incurred by the Black Church is institutional memory. Clergywomen who relocate carry with them years of congregational knowledge—of communal histories, theological struggles, and pastoral wisdom. When such leaders exit, that memory is not easily replaced.

Attrition of this kind weakens continuity. It also perpetuates cycles of leadership instability, as congregations repeatedly fail to retain those capable of guiding adaptive change. The cost is borne not only by departing clergywomen, but by communities left without access to leaders who understand both tradition and transformation.²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 57.

²⁶¹ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 210.

Toward Ecclesial Accountability

Naming these losses is not an act of condemnation. It is an invitation to accountability. Accountability asks not who left, but why staying became untenable. It asks how ecclesial structures have prioritized control over reception, endurance over integrity, and inclusion over transformation.

The argument advanced here is not that the Black Church is uniquely deficient, but that it is not exempt from the patriarchal logics that shape broader ecclesial life. Nor is it exempt from the theological consequences of failing to steward the gifts entrusted to it.

The vocational trajectories examined in this study offer the church an opportunity—not simply to lament loss, but to learn from it. They ask whether ecclesiology can expand to receive authority exercised beyond familiar forms, and whether vocation can be honored even when it leads elsewhere.

The next section turns from ecclesial implication to institutional responsibility, examining how higher education chaplaincy benefits from Black women’s vocational relocation—and what ethical obligations follow from that benefit.

Implications for Higher Education Chaplaincy: Moral Labor Without Illusion

The vocational relocations examined in this study illuminate not only ecclesial failure, but institutional opportunity. Higher education chaplaincy has emerged as a space where Black clergywomen are able to exercise authority, inhabit vocation, and practice ministry with greater coherence than they experienced within congregational leadership structures. Yet this emergence must not be romanticized. Chaplaincy is not a neutral refuge from harm, nor is it exempt from the logics of power, extraction, and inequity that shape higher education broadly. This section

argues that while chaplaincy reveals genuine vocational possibility, it also imposes ethical obligations on the institutions that benefit from Black women's ministerial labor.²⁶²

Chaplaincy as Moral and Interpretive Labor

The findings of Chapter Three demonstrate that chaplaincy is not merely supportive or supplemental work. Black women chaplains function as moral and interpretive leaders within their institutions. They are called upon to help communities make meaning in moments of crisis, to name harm when bureaucratic language falters, and to hold institutional values accountable to lived realities. This labor is theological, even when it is not named as such.

Such work places chaplains at the center of institutional life, particularly during moments of rupture—student deaths, racialized violence, campus conflict, and collective grief. In these moments, chaplains are often tasked with speaking truths institutions cannot otherwise articulate, and with holding together communities strained by fear, anger, or despair. This work requires deep theological formation, emotional intelligence, and ethical clarity.²⁶³

Yet this centrality is often paradoxical. Chaplains may be indispensable during crisis and peripheral during stability. Their authority is activated when institutions need moral grounding, but it may recede when reputational concerns dominate. This fluctuation underscores the moral complexity of chaplaincy labor: it is relied upon precisely when institutional structures are most fragile, yet it is not always structurally protected.

The Risk of Extraction and Over-Reliance

Because chaplaincy labor is relational and affective, it is particularly vulnerable to extraction. Institutions may rely heavily on chaplains to absorb communal distress, manage conflict, and provide emotional containment—often without commensurate authority, resources,

²⁶² Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 178.

²⁶³ Kieser, "Chaplaincy as Public Theology," 11.

or recognition. Black women chaplains are especially at risk of such over-reliance, given longstanding cultural expectations that Black women will provide care, resilience, and emotional labor without complaint.²⁶⁴

Participants in this study were keenly aware of this dynamic. While many experienced chaplaincy as a vocational home-place, they also named moments of exhaustion, invisibility, and institutional dependence that bordered on exploitation. Recognition of authority did not always translate into structural protection. In some cases, chaplains were trusted to hold communities together while being excluded from decision-making processes that shaped the very conditions producing harm.

This risk complicates any simplistic narrative of chaplaincy as “better” than congregational ministry. Chaplaincy does not eliminate power asymmetry; it reconfigures it. Authority may be exercised, but it remains subject to institutional priorities that can shift rapidly in response to funding pressures, donor influence, or public scrutiny.

Tokenization and the Burden of Representation

Another ethical risk confronting higher education chaplaincy is tokenization. As institutions seek to demonstrate commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion, chaplains—particularly Black women—may be positioned as symbolic representatives of institutional values without being granted substantive influence. Visibility can increase even as authority remains circumscribed.

Tokenization places chaplains in an impossible position. They are expected to embody institutional commitments publicly while navigating private limitations on what can be said or challenged. This burden intensifies during moments of racial crisis, when Black women

²⁶⁴ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 145.

chaplains may be called upon to speak for communities they do not control, represent institutions they cannot reform, and absorb anger they did not create.²⁶⁵

Such dynamics reveal the ethical stakes of chaplaincy recognition. Authority that is visible but unsupported becomes a liability rather than a gift. Institutions that benefit from chaplaincy labor without attending to these dynamics risk reproducing the very forms of harm that drove clergywomen away from congregational settings.

What Institutions Owe Chaplains

If higher education institutions are to receive the vocational gifts of Black women chaplains responsibly, recognition must extend beyond symbolic affirmation. Institutions owe chaplains structural support commensurate with the moral labor they perform. This includes clarity of role, access to decision-making spaces, protection for truth-telling, and institutional willingness to hear critique.

Such support is not merely administrative; it is ethical. Chaplains cannot function as moral leaders if they are punished for naming harm or excluded from conversations where institutional values are negotiated. Nor can they sustain vocational integrity if they are expected to compensate for structural failures through personal sacrifice.

The implication here is not that chaplains should be absorbed into administrative hierarchies, but that their interpretive authority must be respected. Pamela Cooper-White's emphasis on the ethical use of the self in pastoral leadership is instructive: authority exercised through presence requires boundaries, accountability, and institutional trust.²⁶⁶ Without these, chaplaincy risks becoming a site of burnout rather than flourishing.

²⁶⁵ Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 81.

²⁶⁶ Cooper-White, *Shared Wisdom*, 104.

Chaplaincy as Revelation, Not Resolution

The argument advanced in this study does not present chaplaincy as a solution to ecclesial failure. Rather, chaplaincy functions as a revelatory site—one that exposes both what is possible when authority is received and what remains unresolved when institutions rely on moral labor without transformation.

Higher education chaplaincy benefits from Black women's vocational relocation in tangible ways: campuses gain leaders capable of navigating complexity, accompanying diverse communities, and articulating moral meaning. Yet this benefit carries responsibility. Institutions must ask not only how chaplains serve the campus, but how the campus serves those who bear its moral weight.

Preparing the Turn Toward Method and Conclusion

The implications outlined here reinforce the central claim of this dissertation: that chaplaincy functions as a vocational home-place not because it is free from harm, but because it alters the conditions under which authority and vocation can be exercised. Recognition, even when partial, changes what becomes possible.

The next section returns briefly to methodology, reflecting on how Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography made these dynamics visible. The conclusion then draws together the ecclesiological, vocational, and institutional threads, affirming that ministry is already being practiced beyond the church's control—and that such practice demands theological reckoning rather than dismissal.

Methodological Return: What This Method Made Visible

This chapter has proceeded on the premise that method and argument are inseparable. The ecclesiological, vocational, and institutional claims advanced here were not derived from

abstract speculation, nor were they imposed retroactively onto participant narratives. They emerged because the methodological framework guiding this study made visible forms of knowledge that are often excluded from vocational and ecclesiological analysis. This section returns briefly to method—not to rehearse its components, but to clarify why Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography was necessary for the argument this chapter advances.²⁶⁷

Why Embodiment Matters for Vocational Analysis

Standard approaches to vocation tend to privilege cognitive articulation: stated call narratives, formal credentials, and institutional trajectories. While such data are not insignificant, they often miss how vocation is actually lived—particularly under conditions of constraint. This study proceeded from a different assumption: that vocation is sensed as well as spoken, borne as well as named.

By attending to embodied experience—breath, posture, vigilance, fatigue, coherence—this method treated the body as a site of analytic knowledge rather than as anecdotal supplement. Participants’ descriptions of bodily shift when entering chaplaincy contexts were not interpreted as affective preference, but as evidence of changed conditions of authority. The body registered where leadership was trusted, where it was contested, and where it became inhabitable long before such realities were articulated discursively.²⁶⁸

Without an embodied analytic lens, these shifts might have been dismissed as subjective feeling or professional satisfaction. Read methodologically, they revealed structural truth: that authority experienced as responsibility rather than permission is lived differently. Embodiment

²⁶⁷ Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, 10.

²⁶⁸ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 89.

thus functioned not as illustration, but as data—essential for understanding how vocation becomes livable or unsustainable.

Autoethnography as Situated Theological Knowledge

Autoethnography played a similarly critical role. Rather than positioning the researcher's experience as exceptional or confessional, Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography treated it as situated theological knowledge—one site among many through which vocational patterns could be discerned. This approach resisted the false neutrality that often governs institutional research while also refusing solipsism.

The researcher's narrative was not offered as representative of all Black clergywomen, but as analytically generative. When read alongside participant accounts, it allowed for pattern recognition across difference. The convergence of sensory, vocational, and authority-related themes across narratives strengthened the study's claims while maintaining attentiveness to specificity.

This approach aligns with Womanist epistemological commitments that affirm the moral and theological authority of lived experience, particularly when such experience emerges from communities historically excluded from institutional knowledge production.²⁶⁹ By situating the researcher within the analytic frame, the method acknowledged that vocation is always discerned from somewhere—and that location matters.

What Other Methods Would Have Missed

The methodological return also clarifies what might have remained obscured had a different approach been taken. A purely institutional analysis could have documented patterns of exclusion without revealing how those patterns are lived in bodies over time. A quantitative

²⁶⁹ Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 104.

study might have identified trends in vocational movement without capturing the ethical discernment embedded in those movements. A narrative approach without sensory attentiveness might have recorded stories of transition without registering the cost of staying.

Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography made it possible to hold these dimensions together. It illuminated not only *where* Black clergywomen moved vocationally, but *why* such movement became necessary and *how* it was experienced as faithful rather than as failure. In doing so, the method supported the chapter's central claim: that chaplaincy functions as a vocational home-place because it alters the conditions under which authority and vocation can be enacted.

Method as Accountability

Finally, the method functioned as a form of accountability. By foregrounding embodied experience and situated knowledge, it resisted the temptation to normalize institutional harm or to spiritualize endurance. It required the analysis to take seriously what it costs to remain in contexts where authority is continually denied. This accountability shaped the chapter's refusal to romanticize either ecclesial staying or vocational relocation.

What follows is therefore not an illustration of this method, but its execution. The argument advanced throughout this chapter depends on the method's capacity to make visible forms of authority, vocation, and institutional failure that would otherwise remain misnamed or unseen.²⁷⁰

The concluding section now draws these threads together, articulating the theological horizon that emerges when ministry is recognized as already happening—whether or not ecclesial structures are prepared to receive it.

²⁷⁰ hooks, *Yearning*, 45.

Conclusion: Toward an Ecclesiology That Can Receive Black Women's Call

This chapter has argued that higher education chaplaincy does not merely represent an alternative vocational pathway for Black clergywomen, but a revelatory site that exposes the limits of inherited ecclesiologies, reconfigures authority, and reframes vocation under conditions of constraint. What has emerged is not a call to abandon the church, nor a declaration that chaplaincy replaces congregational life. Rather, this chapter has sought to name what becomes visible when ministry flourishes beyond the church's control—and what such flourishing demands of theological reflection.

At the center of this argument is a simple but disruptive claim: ministry is already happening. Black clergywomen are exercising authority, bearing responsibility, and practicing the work of care, interpretation, and moral leadership whether or not ecclesial structures are prepared to recognize it. Chaplaincy makes this reality visible not because it invents new forms of ministry, but because it alters the conditions under which existing ministry can be enacted.²⁷¹

Recognition as the Ecclesiological Question

The question that remains, then, is not whether Black women are called, capable, or faithful. The evidence presented throughout this dissertation renders those questions obsolete. The question is whether ecclesiology can be expanded to receive authority when it appears in forms that disrupt inherited alignments between leadership, masculinity, and institutional control.

Recognition, in this sense, is not symbolic affirmation. It is theological discernment. To recognize authority is to name where responsibility is borne, where trust is sustained, and where life is protected. When ecclesial structures cannot recognize such authority, they do not merely misname leadership; they risk misrecognizing the work of the Spirit.²⁷²

²⁷¹ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 201.

²⁷² Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 121.

This chapter has shown that chaplaincy exposes this risk with particular clarity. Ministry that is contested or constrained within congregational settings becomes legible and trusted elsewhere. The issue is not the location of ministry, but the church's narrowing of where it expects God to act.

Authority Beyond Permission

The reconfiguration of authority traced here challenges ecclesial models that equate legitimacy with permission. Authority exercised as responsibility—activated by need, sustained through relationship, and accountable to community—does not require patriarchal legitimation to be real. Chaplaincy makes visible forms of authority that have long been practiced by Black women, even when they were unnamed or denied.

This visibility does not resolve the tensions of authority under constraint. Nor does it eliminate the risks of extraction, surveillance, or misrecognition. But it clarifies the stakes. Authority that is practiced but not recognized places unsustainable burdens on those who carry it. Ecclesiology that cannot name such authority becomes disconnected from lived ministry.²⁷³

Vocation as Integrity, Not Endurance

By reframing vocational relocation as faithful rather than failed, this chapter has also challenged vocational theologies that moralize endurance without attending to cost. Faithfulness cannot be measured solely by staying. When staying requires shrinking—when it demands the continual negation of authority, integrity, or embodied truth—leaving may constitute not abandonment, but obedience.

Chaplaincy functions here as a vocational home-place not because it is free from harm, but because it makes integrity possible. It allows Black clergywomen to live their call without

²⁷³ Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 104.

compulsory diminishment. This reframing does not universalize chaplaincy as the answer to ecclesial exclusion. It insists instead that vocation must be evaluated by its capacity to sustain life, truth, and responsibility.²⁷⁴

Theological Stakes and Future Reckoning

The implications of this argument extend beyond chaplaincy or the Black Church alone. They call into question ecclesiological assumptions that bind ministry too tightly to institutional form, and vocational theologies that confuse suffering with faithfulness. They ask whether theological frameworks are responsive to where ministry is actually being practiced—or whether they remain captive to structures that no longer reflect the movement of the Spirit.

This chapter does not resolve these tensions. It names them. It invites further reckoning—by ecclesial leaders, theological educators, and institutions that rely on moral labor without always acknowledging its cost. Most of all, it affirms that Black women are not waiting for permission to practice ministry. They are already doing so, with authority, clarity, and care.

Ministry Beyond Control

If there is a final claim to be made here, it is this: the work of God exceeds institutional control. Chaplaincy reveals this not as a threat to the church, but as a reminder of its calling. Ecclesiology, at its best, does not police the boundaries of God's activity; it learns to recognize it.

Whether the church is prepared to do so remains an open question. What is not in question is the reality of ministry itself. It is happening—in classrooms and crisis rooms, in moments of grief and moral rupture, in spaces where authority is exercised without permission but not without responsibility.

²⁷⁴ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 165.

This dissertation has argued that such ministry is not marginal. It is revelatory. And it calls the church not to reclaim control, but to expand its capacity for recognition.

Conclusion

Re-Stating the Central Claim: Ministry That Has Already Moved

This dissertation has argued that higher education chaplaincy serves as a liberatory vocational home-place for Black clergywomen whose authority has been constrained, contested, or rendered unsustainable within the Black Church's congregational leadership structures. This claim is not offered as a reform agenda or a recommendation for vocational redirection. It is a descriptive and theological naming of a reality already underway. Across institutional contexts, Black clergywomen are practicing ministry that is authoritative, morally consequential, and theologically substantive in chaplaincy settings—often with greater coherence and integrity than they were permitted in congregational life.

At stake in this claim is not merely the legitimacy of chaplaincy as ministry, but the adequacy of the theological frameworks that recognize ministry when it appears outside inherited ecclesial forms. This study has shown that when authority, vocation, and leadership are narrowly defined by congregational location, ordination status, or patriarchal legitimation, ministry practiced beyond those bounds is too easily labeled secondary, provisional, or deficient. Chaplaincy exposes the limits of those definitions not by opposing the church, but by revealing what ministry looks like when it is received rather than managed.

The central contribution of this dissertation is therefore not to elevate chaplaincy as an idealized alternative to congregational ministry, but to insist that ministry transcends institutional control. Black clergywomen exercise responsibility, bear authority, and sustain communities through moments of crisis, transition, and moral rupture, whether ecclesial structures are prepared to recognize their leadership or not. Chaplaincy functions as a revelatory site by making this excess visible. It shows that the question is not whether Black women are called or capable,

but whether ecclesiology can discern God's work when it unfolds beyond familiar power and permission alignments.²⁷⁵

This study has also challenged dominant narratives that cast women's movement away from congregational ministry as failure, fatigue, or loss of vocation. Such narratives individualize what is, in fact, a structural problem. They presume that faithfulness is measured primarily by endurance within inherited systems rather than by integrity in responding to God's call under constraint. By centering the lived experiences of Black clergywomen, this dissertation has reframed vocational relocation not as retreat but as faithful discernment—a moral and theological response to conditions that make sustained leadership untenable.

Crucially, this reframing does not romanticize departure. Participants in this study did not leave congregational ministry lightly or without grief. Many expressed deep attachment to the Black Church, to congregational life, and to the theological traditions that formed them. Their move toward chaplaincy was not a rejection of the church but a recognition that staying would require continual diminishment of authority, voice, or selfhood. In this sense, chaplaincy emerged not as an escape from ministry but as a context in which ministry could be practiced without compulsory shrinking.²⁷⁶

The argument advanced here resists two common interpretive errors. The first is the tendency to treat chaplaincy as “less than” congregational ministry—a professionalized or secularized alternative that lacks theological depth. The second is the temptation to treat chaplaincy as a solution to ecclesial failure. This dissertation does neither. Instead, it positions chaplaincy as a diagnostic lens for reexamining ecclesiology, authority, and vocation. Chaplaincy

²⁷⁵ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 152.

²⁷⁶ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 165.

reveals what becomes possible when authority is presumed rather than contested, when responsibility is entrusted rather than negotiated, and when leadership is recognized without requiring patriarchal legitimation.

At the heart of this claim is a reconfiguration of authority itself. Authority, as practiced by Black clergywomen chaplains, does not depend on permission from hierarchical gatekeepers. It emerges through relationship, responsibility, and trust—often in moments of acute vulnerability. This form of authority is accountable, embodied, and consequential. It is exercised not through control but through presence, interpretation, and ethical insistence. That such authority is often more readily recognized in public institutions than in ecclesial ones is not a testament to the superiority of those institutions but to the narrowing of ecclesial imagination about who may lead and how leadership may appear.²⁷⁷

This dissertation also insists that vocation must be understood as dynamic rather than static. Vocation unfolds over time in response to changing contexts, embodied knowledge, and ethical clarity. When vocational theologies treat call as singular and unchanging—tethered to a specific institutional form—they leave little room for discernment under constraint. By contrast, the vocational trajectories traced here show that faithfulness may require movement, refusal, and relocation. Such movement does not negate call; it clarifies it.

Taken together, these claims situate this dissertation within broader conversations in practical theology, Womanist ethics, and ecclesiology, while also advancing those conversations. The study does not ask whether chaplaincy can be justified as “real ministry.” Instead, it shows that ministry is already practiced there with depth, authority, and theological seriousness. The

²⁷⁷ Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 104.

question that remains—taken up in the sections that follow—is what this reality demands of theology, institutions, and the church itself.

What This Study Has Made Visible

The most significant contribution of this dissertation lies not only in the arguments it advances but also in what it has rendered visible. Through sustained attention to lived experience, embodiment, and institutional context, this study has illuminated patterns of authority, vocation, and constraint that have long structured Black clergywomen's ministerial lives yet have remained largely unnamed within theological discourse. What has emerged is not a collection of isolated experiences but a discernible vocational logic—one that clarifies why chaplaincy has become a site of coherence and possibility for Black clergywomen and why congregational leadership has so often become a site of contraction.

From Individual Experience to Discernible Pattern

One of the primary ways this study reshapes the field is by shifting interpretive focus from individual decision-making to patterned reality. Prevailing narratives often frame clergywomen's vocational movement as a matter of personal preference, burnout, or temperament. These framings obscure the structural conditions under which discernment occurs and render systemic constraints invisible by translating them into individual choice.

By contrast, this study has demonstrated that Black clergywomen's movement toward chaplaincy often follows a recognizable sequence: sustained experiences of conditional authority in congregational settings; cumulative bodily and emotional strain from ongoing surveillance and misrecognition; ethical discernment shaped by prayer, counsel, and embodied knowledge; and eventual vocational relocation to contexts where authority can be exercised without constant defense. This sequence held across differences in age, denominational background, institutional

type, and geographic location. The recurrence of this pattern indicates that what is at stake is not idiosyncratic dissatisfaction but a structural reality that shapes vocational possibility.

Rendering this pattern visible matters because it shifts responsibility. The question is no longer why individual women leave but why ecclesial structures so consistently fail to recognize their authority. The shift from personal narrative to collective pattern transforms the vocational movement from a story of attrition into a site of theological diagnosis.²⁷⁸

Embodiment as Theological Data

Central to this visibility was the study's methodological insistence that embodiment functions as analytic data rather than anecdotal embellishment. Participants' repeated references to bodily experience—changes in breath, posture, muscle tension, vigilance, and internal coherence—were not treated as incidental or merely affective. They were interpreted as indicators of altered conditions of authority and trust.

In congregational contexts, participants described bodies shaped by hyper-attunement: scanning rooms, monitoring tone, anticipating resistance, and absorbing unspoken expectations. This bodily vigilance was not merely a response to interpersonal conflict; it was the embodied manifestation of conditional authority. Leadership exercised under continual contestation requires constant self-regulation, and over time, that regulation becomes inscribed in the body.

By contrast, chaplaincy contexts were consistently described as spaces where bodily vigilance diminished even as responsibility intensified. Participants did not report the absence of labor or stress. Rather, they described a different *quality* of labor—one in which authority was presumed, responsibility was entrusted, and leadership was not perpetually subject to theological

²⁷⁸ Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women...*, 126.

suspicion. The body registered this shift before it was fully articulated cognitively. In this sense, embodiment served as an archive of institutional truth, revealing where leadership was livable and where it was corrosive.²⁷⁹

This insight has significant theological implications. When theology privileges disembodied notions of call, obedience, or endurance, it risks overlooking how institutional harm is borne somatically. By treating bodies as sites of knowledge, this study insists that vocational discernment cannot be abstracted from lived experience. The body becomes a theological witness—not to preference, but to the moral quality of institutional life.

Authority Practiced Without Permission

Another critical insight from this study concerns authority itself. Black clergywomen in chaplaincy contexts exercised authority that was real, consequential, and publicly recognized—often without the forms of legitimation traditionally associated with ecclesial leadership. Authority here did not derive from hierarchical sanction or patriarchal endorsement. It emerged through responsibility enacted in moments of need, sustained through trust, and confirmed through practice.

Participants described being relied upon during institutional crises, racialized trauma, student deaths, and moments of ethical rupture. They were called upon to interpret events theologically, to hold communities together through ritual and emotion, and to speak truths that institutional language could not. This authority was not symbolic. It shaped outcomes, influenced decisions, and carried moral weight.

²⁷⁹ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 89.

What this study makes visible, then, is a form of authority long practiced by Black women but rarely named as such. In congregational contexts, similar forms of leadership were often treated as auxiliary, supportive, or informal. In chaplaincy, they were recognized as central. This contrast exposes the contingency of ecclesial authority structures and raises urgent questions about how legitimacy is assigned.²⁸⁰

The Misnaming of Faithfulness

This study also makes visible the theological misnaming that occurs when vocational endurance is treated as the primary measure of faithfulness. Many participants internalized expectations that staying—despite exhaustion, harm, or silencing—constituted a moral good, while leaving signaled weakness or failure. These expectations are deeply gendered and racialized, drawing on long-standing cultural scripts that valorize Black women's endurance while obscuring its cost.

By attending to discernment under constraint, this study reframes faithfulness as responsiveness rather than persistence. Faithfulness emerges not from remaining in any particular role at all costs, but from acting with integrity in response to God's call as it unfolds amid concrete conditions. When remaining requires continual diminishment of authority or selfhood, departure may be not abandonment but obedience.

This reframing disrupts theological narratives that spiritualize suffering while leaving unjust structures intact. Instead, it aligns with Womanist critiques of redemptive suffering that insist that survival, coherence, and truth-telling are moral achievements.²⁸¹

²⁸⁰ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 152.

²⁸¹ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 165.

Theological Cost and Institutional Blindness

Finally, this study makes visible the theological cost of institutional blindness. When ministry marked by depth, authority, and ethical clarity is affirmed outside ecclesial structures yet constrained within them, the issue is not a lack of vocation. It is a failure of recognition. Such a failure has consequences not only for clergywomen but also for the church's theological imagination.

Ecclesial frameworks that cannot recognize authority when it appears outside familiar forms risk mistaking institutional continuity for faithfulness. Over time, this confusion narrows the church's capacity to discern where God is already at work. Chaplaincy exposes this narrowing by revealing ministry flourishing beyond ecclesial control—not as rebellion but as response.

What this study has made visible, then, is not simply an alternative vocational pathway, but a theological gap. It invites theology to reckon with lived ministry as a source of insight rather than anomaly, and to attend more carefully to the places where authority, vocation, and embodiment converge under constraint.

The next section builds on this visibility by exploring its full theological implications, asking how ecclesiology, authority, and vocation must be reconsidered in light of what has been revealed.

Theological Implications: Reconsidering Ecclesiology, Authority, and Vocation

What this study has made visible now demands theological reckoning. The patterns of authority, embodiment, and vocational movement traced across these chapters cannot be adequately interpreted within inherited frameworks that assume stable institutional alignment between ministry, legitimacy, and congregational form. Theological categories themselves—

particularly ecclesiology, authority, and vocation—require reconsideration if they are to remain responsive to the realities of lived ministry under constraint.

This section does not propose a new systematic theology of ministry. Rather, it draws out the implications that arise when theology takes seriously what Black clergywomen are already doing. The argument here is not that theology must be made relevant to practice, but that it must be accountable to practice.

Ecclesiology Beyond Congregational Containment

The first implication concerns ecclesiology. Dominant ecclesiological models—particularly within Protestant traditions—continue to locate legitimate ministry primarily in congregational life, pulpit authority, and ordination-centered leadership. Although these models differ in emphasis, they share the assumption that the church’s normative site of theological action is the gathered congregation and that ministerial authority flows through its formal structures.

The findings of this study strain that assumption. Black clergywomen are practicing the core work of ministry—pastoral accompaniment, proclamation, ritual leadership, moral interpretation, and communal holding—within chaplaincy contexts that are neither marginal nor secondary to ecclesial life. These contexts are public, pluralistic, and institutionally complex, yet they serve as sites where theological leadership is exercised with clarity and consequence.

This does not require redefining chaplaincy as “church by another name,” nor does it dissolve the distinction between ecclesial and institutional life. What it does require is an ecclesiology capable of recognizing ministry beyond congregational containment. When ecclesiology treats congregational form as exhaustive of where God acts, it risks mistaking institutional familiarity for theological sufficiency.

This risk is not abstract. Ecclesiologies that cannot recognize ministry beyond inherited forms often fail to account for how the Spirit moves amid exclusion, adaptation, and survival. Black theology has long insisted that God's liberative activity is often disclosed outside sanctioned spaces, particularly among those pushed to the margins. This study extends that insistence by showing how chaplaincy serves as a contemporary site where ecclesiology is tested—not by rejection of the church, but by the flourishing of ministry beyond its control.

The implication, then, is not that the church is obsolete but that ecclesiology must be porous enough to receive what it cannot manage. The question becomes not Where is the church? but Can the church recognize where ministry is already happening?

Authority Reconfigured: Responsibility Without Permission

A second implication concerns authority itself. Traditional ecclesial frameworks often equate authority with permission: it is granted through ordination, hierarchy, or institutional sanction. While such mechanisms can order communal life, they also function as gatekeeping structures—particularly for those whose leadership disrupts gendered and racialized norms.

This study shows that Black clergywomen in chaplaincy contexts exercise authority not derived from permission but from responsibility enacted in response to need. Authority emerges through presence in moments of crisis, trusted interpretation of meaning, and sustained accountability to communities navigating grief, conflict, and ethical rupture. This authority is neither informal nor symbolic. It is recognized precisely because it is necessary.

Importantly, this form of authority is not unaccountable. It is constrained by institutional context, ethical obligation, and relational trust. Yet it does not require patriarchal legitimation to be real. What chaplaincy makes visible is that authority has always functioned this way for Black women—practiced, relied upon, and yet frequently unnamed in ecclesial discourse.

Womanist ethics provides critical language for naming this reality. Moral authority, as articulated by Womanist scholars, arises from embodied ethical responsibility rather than from positional power alone.²⁸² When authority is understood as responsibility borne rather than permission granted, the dissonance between congregational and chaplaincy recognition becomes stark. The issue is not whether Black women can lead, but whether ecclesial structures are willing to recognize leadership when it does not conform to patriarchal form.

This reconfiguration of authority exposes a theological vulnerability. When authority is exercised but not recognized, those who bear it face unsustainable strain. Ecclesiology that cannot name responsibility where it exists risks exploiting it while denying it legitimacy. The theological task, then, is not to invent new authority but to recognize what has long been exercised.

Vocation as Discernment Under Constraint

The third implication concerns vocation. In many theological accounts, vocation is treated as singular, static, and tied to a specific institutional role. Faithfulness is often measured by continuity—by staying put despite difficulty. Such accounts leave little room for discernment when institutions themselves become sites of harm or diminishment.

This study challenges that framework. The vocational trajectories traced here show that the call unfolds dynamically, in conversation with embodied knowledge, ethical clarity, and structural constraints. Participants did not abandon their vocation when they left congregational ministry; they clarified it. Their movement toward chaplaincy reflected sustained discernment shaped by prayer, counsel, exhaustion, and moral reckoning.

²⁸² Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 104.

This reframing resists narratives equating departure with failure and also resists romanticizing endurance as the highest form of faithfulness. Womanist critiques of redemptive suffering are instructive here. When suffering is spiritualized without attending to its source, theology becomes complicit in sustaining unjust structures. By contrast, this study treats survival, coherence, and integrity as theological achievements rather than moral deficits.

Vocation, then, is understood not as fidelity to a single institutional form but as faithfulness to God's call as it unfolds amid changing conditions. Discernment under constraint is not a secondary or compromised form of vocation; it is often the most ethically serious.

Theological Stakes

Taken together, these implications do not resolve ecclesial tension; they clarify it. They reveal a gap between lived ministry and inherited theological frameworks—a gap most visible when Black women's authority is recognized outside the church more readily than within it. Chaplaincy does not create this gap. It exposes it.

The task before theology, then, is not to defend existing structures or idealize alternatives, but to reckon honestly with where authority is borne, where vocation is sustained, and where the Spirit's work is already evident. Theology that cannot learn from lived ministry risks becoming a retrospective justification for institutional failure rather than a responsive account of God's ongoing work in the world.

Institutional Reckoning: The Black Church and the Cost of Misrecognition

The theological implications outlined above point toward institutional reckoning. If ministry is already being practiced with authority, coherence, and moral seriousness beyond congregational structures, the Black Church must confront not only questions of inclusion but also questions of recognition. The findings of this dissertation suggest that the central issue is not

whether Black clergywomen are present in ecclesial spaces, but whether their authority can be received without qualification, surveillance, or containment. What is at stake in this reckoning is not simply equity for individual leaders, but the theological integrity and pastoral capacity of the church itself.²⁸³

From Inclusion to Reception

In recent decades, many Black churches have adopted the language of inclusion to respond to gendered exclusion from leadership. While this language may reflect a genuine desire for change, it often remains tethered to existing power arrangements. Inclusion tends to add women to structures whose assumptions about authority, legitimacy, and leadership remain unchanged. As a result, women may gain visibility without security, voice without decision-making power, and responsibility without trust.

This study demonstrates that inclusion alone does not resolve the deeper problem of misrecognition. Participants did not primarily describe frustration at being excluded from leadership spaces; they described exhaustion from occupying them conditionally. Their authority was frequently contingent—dependent on approval, mediated by male oversight, and vulnerable to revocation. Inclusion without reception thus functioned as containment rather than transformation. It expanded participation while preserving patriarchal control.

Reception, by contrast, asks whether the church can recognize authority when it appears in forms that disrupt inherited norms. It requires trust, relinquishment of control, and theological humility. The vocational relocations traced in this study suggest that, too often, such reception

²⁸³ Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women . . .*, 126.

has not been possible. The issue is not women's willingness to lead, but the church's capacity to be led.²⁸⁴

The Pastoral Cost of Conditional Authority

The cost of this misrecognition is both pastoral and theological. When authority is conditional, leadership becomes precarious. Black clergywomen described congregational contexts in which energy that might have been directed toward care, preaching, and communal imagination was instead consumed by vigilance: monitoring tone, anticipating resistance, managing perception, and absorbing unspoken expectations.

Over time, this vigilance erodes pastoral presence. Leaders who must continually defend their legitimacy have a diminished capacity to accompany others through grief, conflict, and transformation. The congregation, in turn, loses access to the full depth of its leaders' gifts. This loss is cumulative, affecting not only individual clergywomen but also the church's ability to respond creatively and faithfully to changing pastoral realities.

This study suggests that the attrition of Black clergywomen from congregational leadership should be understood not as personal failure but as institutional depletion. When leaders capable of adaptive, relational, and theologically grounded ministry cannot remain without harm, the church forfeits resources it urgently needs.²⁸⁵

Theological Loss and Ecclesial Narrowing

Beyond pastoral consequence lies theological loss. Ecclesiology shapes not only how leadership is organized but also how God's activity is discerned. When the church cannot recognize authority exercised by Black women without patriarchal legitimation, it risks

²⁸⁴ Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women* . . . , 126.

²⁸⁵ Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women* . . . , 126.

misnaming the work of the Spirit. Black theology has long insisted that God's liberative presence is disclosed among those marginalized by dominant structures.²⁸⁶ When such disclosure is ignored or constrained, theology itself becomes impoverished.

The flourishing of Black clergywomen's ministry in chaplaincy contexts intensifies this concern. When ministry marked by integrity, authority, and depth is affirmed outside the church yet resisted within it, the problem is not a lack of vocation. It is an ecclesial narrowing of theological imagination. The church's criteria for legitimacy become misaligned with the realities of lived ministry, and institutional continuity is mistaken for faithfulness.

This narrowing also shapes congregational formation. Communities implicitly learn which authority is trustworthy and which must be monitored. Over time, such formation reinforces gendered hierarchies that distort not only leadership patterns but also theological understanding of who bears God's word.

Institutional Memory and Generational Cost

Another dimension of loss concerns institutional memory. Black clergywomen who relocate for their vocations carry with them years of congregational knowledge—communal histories, theological struggles, and pastoral wisdom. When such leaders leave, that memory is not easily replaced. The church loses continuity, depth, and the capacity to learn from its own patterns of exclusion.

This loss has generational implications. Younger leaders observe which vocations are sustained and which are depleted. When women's leadership is repeatedly marked by exhaustion or departure, the church—often unintentionally—communicates that such leadership is

²⁸⁶ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 121.

precarious at best. This communication shapes vocational imagination long before formal discernment begins.

Toward Ecclesial Accountability

Naming these losses is not an act of indictment. It is an invitation to accountability. Accountability asks not who left but why staying became untenable. It asks how ecclesial practices of authority, recognition, and trust have functioned—and what they have cost.

This dissertation does not offer a blueprint for reform. It does, however, insist that ecclesiology must be accountable to lived ministry rather than insulated from it. The vocational trajectories traced here ask whether the Black Church can expand its capacity for recognition—whether it can recognize authority exercised beyond familiar forms and whether it can name faithfulness when it appears as movement rather than endurance.

The next section turns to a parallel reckoning within higher education, examining what institutions gain from Black clergywomen's vocational relocations—and the ethical obligations that follow from that gain.

Institutional Reckoning: Higher Education, Moral Labor, and Ethical Obligation

If the Black Church must reckon with what it has failed to receive, higher education must reckon with what it has been willing to accept—and, at times, depend on. The findings of this study show that higher education chaplaincy has become a site where Black clergywomen can exercise authority, inhabit their vocations, and practice ministry with greater coherence than in many congregational contexts. Yet this reception is not neutral. It carries institutional benefits, moral reliance, and ethical obligations. Chaplaincy's emergence as a vocational home-place must therefore be examined not only as a possibility but as a responsibility.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁷ Kieser, "Chaplaincy as Public Theology," 11.

Chaplaincy as Moral and Interpretive Labor

Higher education chaplaincy is a form of moral and interpretive labor embedded within complex institutions. Black women chaplains are routinely called upon to help campuses navigate grief, conflict, ethical ruptures, and racialized crises. They are asked to translate institutional language into human meaning, to hold communities together when strained by fear or anger, and to articulate moral truths that bureaucratic processes cannot name.

This labor is theological, even when it is not explicitly framed as such. It draws on pastoral formation, ritual competence, ethical reasoning, and spiritual discernment. Chaplains are often entrusted with responsibilities that exceed their formal authority: shaping communal memory after tragedy, mediating institutional responses during public controversy, and accompanying individuals whose suffering exposes institutional fragility.

What this study makes visible is that such labor is not peripheral to institutional life. It is central—especially when institutional credibility is at stake. Chaplains are relied upon precisely when systems fail to contain human complexity. This reliance confers authority but also exposes vulnerability.²⁸⁸

The Risk of Extraction and Over-Reliance

Because chaplaincy work is relational and affective, it is especially vulnerable to extraction. Institutions may rely heavily on chaplains to absorb communal distress, manage conflict, and provide moral grounding, without offering commensurate structural support. For Black women chaplains, this risk is compounded by longstanding cultural expectations that Black women provide care, resilience, and emotional labor without requiring protection or reciprocity.

²⁸⁸ Kieser, “Chaplaincy as Public Theology,” 11.

Participants in this study were acutely aware of this dynamic. While chaplaincy often served as a vocational home place, it also entailed moments of exhaustion, invisibility, and institutional dependence that bordered on exploitation. Authority was recognized when needed but not always safeguarded. Trust was extended in crisis but not consistently translated into access or influence.

This pattern complicates any celebratory narrative of chaplaincy as liberation without cost. Chaplaincy does not escape power asymmetry; it reorganizes it. When moral authority is invoked primarily during institutional distress, chaplains risk becoming shock absorbers for systemic failure rather than partners in institutional transformation.²⁸⁹

Visibility Without Protection

Another ethical concern raised by this study is tokenization. As higher education institutions seek to demonstrate their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, even when they do not explicitly name such commitments, chaplains—particularly Black women—may be positioned as visible representatives of institutional values without substantive authority. Visibility increases, while protection remains tenuous.

This dynamic places chaplains in a precarious position. They are expected to speak publicly on behalf of institutional values while navigating private constraints on criticism. During moments of racial crisis, Black women chaplains may be asked to absorb community anger, represent institutional care, and manage moral outrage—all while lacking decision-making power over the conditions that produced the harm.

Such positioning mirrors the conditional authority many participants encountered in congregational settings, albeit in a different institutional register. Recognition without protection

²⁸⁹ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 145.

reproduces harm rather than resolving it. The difference between reception and exploitation lies not in affirmation alone but in whether institutions are willing to bear responsibility alongside those who carry moral weight.²⁹⁰

What Institutions Owe Chaplains

If higher education institutions are to receive the vocational gifts of Black women chaplains ethically, recognition must extend beyond symbolic affirmation. Institutions owe chaplains clarity of role, access to decision-making spaces, and protection for truth-telling that challenges institutional comfort. They owe chaplains boundaries that prevent over-reliance and mechanisms of accountability that do not punish moral clarity.

These obligations are not managerial preferences; they are ethical imperatives. Institutions that rely on chaplaincy labor to sustain moral credibility must be willing to share risk, listen to criticism, and address structural conditions that produce recurring crises. Without such commitments, chaplaincy risks becoming another site where Black women's labor is consumed rather than honored.

This study therefore reframes chaplaincy not as a solution to ecclesial failure but as a revelatory space that exposes institutional dependence on moral labor. Higher education benefits from Black clergywomen's vocational relocation. That benefit demands reckoning.

Chaplaincy as Revelation, Not Resolution

Chaplaincy's significance in this study lies not in its promise of safety or permanence but in what it reveals about authority, vocation, and institutional life. It shows what becomes possible

²⁹⁰ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 252.

when leadership is received rather than contested. It also shows how quickly that possibility can be compromised when institutions rely on moral labor without structural change.

The ethical question, then, is not whether chaplaincy can sustain Black clergywomen indefinitely. It is whether institutions can learn from what chaplaincy makes visible: that ministry flourishes where authority is trusted, responsibility is shared, and embodied truth is taken seriously.

The next section turns from institutional reckoning to methodological contribution, reflecting on how Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography made these dynamics legible—and what that visibility offers to theological scholarship more broadly.

Methodological Contribution: Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography as Theological Knowledge

The contributions of this dissertation are inseparable from its methodological commitments. What has been rendered visible here—patterns of authority, vocation, embodiment, and institutional constraint—could not have emerged through methods that privilege abstraction, neutrality, or disembodied analysis. Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography functioned not as a stylistic choice or narrative supplement but as a form of theological knowledge production capable of accounting for ministry as it is actually lived.

This section explicitly claims the contribution. It situates the method not only as appropriate for this study but also as a necessary intervention within practical theology, ecclesiology, and qualitative research more broadly.

Why Method Matters Theologically

Theological discourse has long struggled to account for lived ministry without either instrumentalizing experience or subordinating it to preexisting doctrinal frameworks. Experience

is often treated as illustrative rather than analytic, valued only insofar as it confirms theological claims developed elsewhere. This hierarchy limits theology's capacity to learn from the realities it seeks to interpret.

Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography disrupts this hierarchy by treating lived experience—particularly embodied experience under constraint—as a site of theological insight. Rather than asking how theology can be applied to practice, this method asks what theology must reckon with when practice is treated as knowledge. In doing so, it aligns with Womanist epistemological commitments that affirm the authority of lived experience, especially among those whose knowledge has been historically excluded from institutional validation.²⁹¹

In this study, theology did not precede experience as its interpretive master. Instead, it emerged through sustained attention to how Black clergywomen discerned call, exercised authority, and bore responsibility across institutional contexts. The method thus functioned as a theological discipline in its own right—one capable of generating insight rather than merely illustrating theory.

Embodiment as Epistemology, Not Illustration

A defining feature of this methodological approach is its insistence that embodiment constitutes epistemology. Bodies do not merely react to institutional conditions; they register them. Breath, posture, vigilance, fatigue, and coherence become sites where power, recognition, and constraint are experienced before they are cognitively articulated.

Participants' descriptions of bodily contraction in congregational settings and of bodily coherence in chaplaincy contexts were not interpreted as matters of preference or personality. They were treated as data—evidence of how authority is lived when contested versus when

²⁹¹ Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, 10.

trusted. In this analysis, the body functioned as an archive of institutional truth, revealing where leadership was sustainable and where it became corrosive.

Such an approach challenges dominant theological tendencies that privilege cognition over sensation and endurance over coherence. By treating bodies as sites of knowledge, this method reveals how theological abstractions—such as obedience, faithfulness, or sacrifice—are inscribed somatically. It therefore resists the spiritualization of harm by insisting that theology attend to how institutions are lived, not merely how they are justified.²⁹²

Autoethnography as Accountable Location

Autoethnography, as deployed here, was neither confessional nor exemplary. The researcher's experience was not presented as representative of all Black clergywomen, nor as a privileged standpoint immune to critique. Instead, it served as an accountable location—one analytic site among others through which patterns could be discerned.

By situating the researcher within the field of analysis, this method rejected the fiction of neutrality that often governs institutional research. At the same time, it resisted solipsism by placing the researcher's narrative in conversation with participant accounts, historical analysis, and theological reflection. Authority did not rest in a single story but in the convergence of patterns across differences.

This approach reflects Womanist methodological commitments to communal discernment, relational accountability, and ethical reflexivity. Knowledge is generated not through distance but through disciplined proximity—through attentiveness to how power, responsibility, and survival are negotiated in real time.²⁹³

²⁹² Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 89.

²⁹³ Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, 31.

What Other Methods Would Have Missed

The necessity of this method becomes clearer when considering what alternative approaches might have obscured. A purely institutional analysis could have documented patterns of exclusion without revealing how those patterns are embodied over time. A quantitative study might have identified vocational trends without capturing the moral discernment embedded within them. A narrative approach inattentive to embodiment might have recorded stories of transition without registering the cost of staying.

Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography made it possible to hold together structure and sensation, institution and intimacy, theology and survival. It illuminated not only *where* Black clergywomen moved vocationally but also *why* that movement became ethically necessary and *how* it was experienced as faithful rather than failed.

In this sense, the method does not merely support the dissertation's claims; it constitutes them. The argument that chaplaincy functions as a vocational home-place emerges directly from the method's ability to make visible the relationship among authority, embodiment, and institutional recognition.

Method as Ethical Accountability

Finally, this methodological approach served as a form of ethical accountability. By foregrounding embodied experience and lived constraints, it refused to normalize institutional harm or to theologize endurance without cost. It required the analysis to remain answerable to the cost of staying in spaces where authority is continually denied and legitimacy perpetually negotiated.

This accountability shaped the dissertation's refusal to romanticize either staying in a congregation or relocating for a vocation. It prevented chaplaincy from being framed as salvation

and the church from being framed as irredeemable. Instead, it held institutions accountable for the realities they produce and theologians accountable for the lives their frameworks seek to interpret.

What follows from this method, therefore, is not a case study or illustration but a theological claim grounded in lived ministry. What has been offered here is not an example of Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography but its enactment.²⁹⁴

The final sections of this conclusion turn to scope, limitations, and theological horizon—naming where this work must stop, where it may continue, and what it ultimately affirms about ministry that transcends institutional control.

Scope, Limits, and the Ethics of Refusal

Every scholarly project is shaped by limits. What distinguishes rigorous scholarship is not the absence of constraints but the ethical clarity with which those constraints are named and inhabited. This dissertation's focus on Black clergywomen in higher education chaplaincy reflects that clarity. The scope of this study is neither incidental nor provisional; it is an intentional refusal of overgeneralization in favor of depth, accountability, and theological honesty.²⁹⁵

Scope as Methodological and Ethical Commitment

The decision to focus specifically on Black clergywomen was not driven by representational logic or demographic convenience. It was driven by the recognition that Black women's vocational lives have long been treated as illustrative rather than authoritative in theological scholarship. By centering Black clergywomen as theological subjects rather than case

²⁹⁴ Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, 31.

²⁹⁵ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 138.

examples, this study resists the tendency to universalize from dominant experiences while marginalizing those on the margins.

Similarly, the focus on higher education chaplaincy reflects an ethical commitment to studying ministry where it is actually practiced rather than where theology has traditionally presumed it to reside. This choice does not deny the significance of other ministerial contexts. Instead, it acknowledges that vocational coherence often becomes most visible at institutional margins—where authority is negotiated, legitimacy is contested, and survival requires discernment.

Expanding the scope prematurely—to claim universal applicability across gender, race, or institutional forms—would risk reproducing the very forms of abstraction this study critiques. Precision here is not a limitation; it is a responsibility.

Against the Demand for Universality

Theological scholarship often operates under an implicit demand for universality. Claims are often assessed by the breadth of their applicability rather than by the integrity of their foundations. This demand has consequences for scholars working from marginalized locations, whose work is often pressed to “speak for more” before it is allowed to speak fully.

This study rejects that demand. It does not claim that all clergywomen experience vocation in the same way, nor that chaplaincy serves as a home-place for everyone who enters it. It does not suggest that ecclesial marginalization operates uniformly across racial or denominational contexts. Instead, it insists that Black clergywomen’s experiences are sufficient grounds for theological reflection in their own right.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁶ hooks, *Talking Back*, 9.

Such refusal is not insular. It is generative. By attending closely to one site of lived ministry, the study offers insights that may resonate beyond its immediate scope without generalizing. Resonance, rather than representativeness, becomes the criterion of contribution.

Institutional Focus and Its Consequences

This dissertation's focus on higher education chaplaincy also has specific limits. It does not address chaplaincy in healthcare, the military, prisons, or corporate settings, nor does it offer a comparative analysis across institutional types. These omissions are not oversights; they reflect a deliberate choice to engage one institutional ecology in depth rather than many superficially.

Higher education is a distinctive context where moral authority, public accountability, and institutional reputation intersect. Chaplains operate within bureaucratic systems that both rely on and constrain moral leadership. By focusing on this context, this study traced how authority is activated, managed, and, at times, exploited within pluralistic public institutions.

Future research may fruitfully extend this analysis to other chaplaincy contexts. Such work would not correct this study's limitations; it would build upon them.

The Limits of Method and the Refusal of Exhaustion

Methodologically, Critical Womanist Sensory Autoethnography prioritizes depth of engagement over breadth of coverage. This choice entails limits. The study does not aim for statistical generalizability, nor does it seek to capture every possible variation in chaplaincy experience. Instead, it attends to convergence—where patterns recur across differences.

This methodological orientation also entails an ethical refusal of exhaustion. To demand that one study account for all racial, gendered, institutional, and ecclesial permutations of ministry would be to reproduce extractive expectations often placed on Black women's labor. By

setting clear boundaries on scope, this dissertation honors the principle that no single project—and no single scholar—can or should bear the weight of total explanation.²⁹⁷

Generative Openings

While this study clearly outlines its limits, it also gestures toward generative openings. Comparative research across chaplaincy contexts could illuminate how authority and vocation function under different institutional pressures. Studies centering Black men, queer clergy, or clergy from other racialized communities could explore how similar dynamics emerge or diverge. Ecclesial research attentive to congregations that have successfully received women's authority could offer counter-narratives to those traced here.

Such directions do not diminish the present work. They testify to its generative capacity. By clarifying what this study does—and does not—claim, the conclusion safeguards its integrity while inviting further inquiry.

Limits as Faithful Boundary

Finally, this section affirms that limits themselves can be a form of faithfulness. Just as vocation requires discernment about where one can serve with integrity, scholarship requires discernment about what one can responsibly claim. This dissertation does not attempt to resolve every ecclesial tension or institutional failure it names. Instead, it attends to one sustained reality: Black clergywomen practicing ministry faithfully in contexts that could recognize their authority when the church often could not.

In naming this reality clearly and refusing to overextend its claims, the study models the ethical posture it attributes to its participants—clarity about capacity, honesty about constraints, and a commitment to integrity over endurance.

²⁹⁷ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 252.

The final section of this conclusion now turns from scope and limits to the theological horizon, offering a final word on ministry that has already moved beyond institutional control.

A Final Theological Word: Ministry Beyond Control, Recognition Beyond Permission

This dissertation ends where it began: with Black clergywomen practicing ministry faithfully, creatively, and authoritatively—often beyond the ecclesial structures that failed to receive them. What has been traced through historical analysis, qualitative narrative, and theological reflection is not a story of loss but of continuity. Ministry has not disappeared. It has moved.

The central theological claim here is deceptively simple: the work of God exceeds institutional control. This is not a romantic assertion about freedom or innovation. It is a sober recognition grounded in lived ministry. Black clergywomen have continued to preach, accompany, interpret, ritualize, and lead—even when the church has constrained their authority or rendered their vocation untenable. Chaplaincy has made this reality visible not by creating new forms of ministry but by receiving forms that already exist.

Recognition as the Remaining Question

The question now confronting theology is not whether such ministry is legitimate. That question has already been answered in practice. The question is whether theology—and the institutions it informs—can recognize what is already happening. Recognition, as this study has shown, is not symbolic affirmation. It is theological discernment. It identifies where authority is borne, where responsibility is carried, and where life is sustained.

When recognition fails, authority does not disappear. It becomes unacknowledged, unsupported, and costly. Black women's ministry has long occupied this space—relied upon yet not secured, practiced yet not named. The consequence of such misrecognition is not only

individual harm but also theological distortion. A church that cannot recognize authority exercised by Black women risks misnaming the Spirit's work and mistaking institutional continuity for faithfulness.²⁹⁸

Chaplaincy exposes this distortion with clarity. It reveals that authority does not require permission to exist, but it does require recognition to be sustained. Where recognition is extended, ministry becomes inhabitable. Where it is withheld, ministry becomes a site of attrition.

Authority That Refuses Containment

This dissertation has insisted that authority must be understood not as permission granted but as responsibility enacted. Authority appears where communities entrust leaders to hold meaning in moments of vulnerability, to speak truth when language fails, and to remain present when systems fracture. Such authority is accountable, embodied, and morally consequential.

Black clergywomen have exercised this authority across ecclesial and institutional contexts for generations. What has changed is not the existence of their authority but the conditions under which it is recognized. Chaplaincy is a site where responsibility is more readily entrusted, even as it remains constrained. This reality challenges theological frameworks that locate authority exclusively within sanctioned ecclesial roles and invites a broader reckoning with how legitimacy is assigned.

Authority that refuses containment does not threaten the church. It reveals its limits. The task of theology is not to discipline such authority back into familiar forms, but to learn from where it already appears.

²⁹⁸ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 165.

Vocation That Moves Without Betrayal

At the level of vocation, this study names movement not as betrayal but as discernment. Faithfulness has too often been measured by endurance alone, particularly for Black women, whose capacity to absorb harm has been normalized as a virtue. This dissertation refuses that measure.

Vocation, as traced here, is dynamic. It unfolds in response to God's call, mediated through embodied knowledge, ethical clarity, and structural constraints. When remaining in a role requires continual diminishment of authority or selfhood, movement may be the most faithful response available.

This reframing neither diminishes the church nor exalts chaplaincy. It honors discernment as a moral practice and insists that integrity, coherence, and sustainability are legitimate theological criteria. These criteria resist narratives that sanctify suffering while leaving unjust structures intact.²⁹⁹

The Spirit's Work Beyond Ecclesial Imagination

Perhaps the most significant theological horizon opened by this study is its insistence that the Spirit's work often exceeds ecclesial imagination. Ministry is not waiting to be authorized by theology; theology is catching up to what ministry has already enacted. This inversion matters.

When theology lags behind lived ministry, it risks becoming reactive—defending institutions rather than discerning God's activity. By attending closely to where Black clergywomen already practice ministry with authority and care, this dissertation calls theology

²⁹⁹ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 165.

back to its task: naming God's work as it unfolds in the world, not only as it is anticipated within doctrine.

This call is not directed solely at the Black Church or higher education. It is directed at theological scholarship itself. Can theology remain responsive to lives lived under constraint? Can it recognize authority exercised without permission? Can it affirm vocation that moves rather than stays?

A Word of Assurance, Not Demand

This dissertation does not end with a demand for reform, nor with a prescription for institutional change. It ends with assurance. Black clergywomen are not waiting for permission to practice ministry. They are already doing so—with depth, clarity, and faithfulness. The work of God is not stalled by ecclesial misrecognition. It continues.

What remains open is whether institutions—and the theologies that underwrite them—will learn to recognize what they cannot control. Whether they will accept authority where it appears. Whether they will honor vocation as it unfolds.

This study affirms that ministry is not fragile. It is resilient. It adapts, relocates, and persists. And it does so not because institutions are adequate but because the Spirit is faithful.

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