

## *Prologue*

Our Club life is the outgrowth of the encouragement and inspiration which the Church has given to the work of women in the Church and, as a “little leaven will leaven the whole,” so have the small beginnings of organized work among women led to these general movements, both state and national that have brought out so prominently the great possibilities of Christian womanhood. . . .

[T]he leaders in religious thought and effort have become the leaders in nearly every fraternal, business, educational and reform movement which has been inaugurated or prosecuted for the improvement, development or advancement of the race.

*Mamie E. Steward (1907)*

ORGANIZATION HAS GIVEN HOPE for a better future by revealing to colored women their own executive ability. . . . [T]heir organizations have bound the women together in a common interest so strong that no earthly force can sever it. . . . Organization has taught them the art of self government.” Through words and deeds, Sarah Jane Woodson Early boldly asserted her right to speak and act, during a time when women were mostly considered appendages to their husbands. In 1894, when she penned these words, Early was sixty-nine years of age. As an independent thinker and pioneering black feminist involved in the early women’s movement, she was widely known and revered as a model to be emulated by other women. Yet Early does not fit into any of the niches defined for either women or African Americans of her time. She was neither poor, enslaved, illiterate, nor southern in her upbringing. As the daughter of free blacks who lived in a small town in Chillicothe, Ohio, Sarah Jane Woodson grew up in a black community that revered both religion and education. Her philosophy was shaped by the issues of the time, in particular the abolitionist and women’s rights movement. As a graduate of Oberlin College in 1856, she was among the first black women to obtain a college degree. Her appointment to the Wilberforce University faculty in

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1859 distinguished her as the first black woman to serve on the faculty of an American university. In 1865, at the end of the Civil War, she went south to Hillsborough, North Carolina, to teach black girls at a school administered by the Freedmen's Bureau. In 1868, at the age of forty-three, Sarah Jane Woodson married Rev. Jordan W. Early, a pioneering minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Accompanying her husband to his many charges, Sarah Early continued to teach, and became deeply immersed in her duties as a minister's wife. In 1888 she became the first black woman to serve as superintendent of the Colored Division of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. Her experiences at every level of society, among blacks and whites of all classes, confirmed her belief that the involvement of African American women in social and political reform was critical to racial advancement.

Sarah Early is a prototype of the pioneering black feminists whose lives were shaped in the tumultuous events of the nineteenth century—women who defined what it meant to be a woman and an African American. These women created organizations and launched movements whose impact is still felt. The lives of Sarah Early, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Rev. Julia Foote, Virginia W. Broughton, Fanny Jackson Coppin, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Rev. Florence Spearing Randolph, Sarah Willie Layten, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Mamie E. Steward, Mary McLeod Bethune, and numerous other women who came of age in the nineteenth and twentieth century illustrate how religion informed and shaped the public lives and social activism of African American women and how that in turn has influenced the American experience more broadly.

*Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* takes a historical approach to the subject of women, religion, and politics, analyzing religious, class, and gender dynamics in the black community and racial dynamics in the larger society. *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice* demonstrates how black women have woven their faith into their daily experiences, and illustrates their centrality to the development of African American religion, politics, and public culture. Moreover, it emphasizes their importance to the struggle for racial and gender freedom. Emboldened by their faith and filled with hope, over time black women created an organizational network that has been indispensable to the fight against racism, sexism, and poverty.

It is fitting that this book is published at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and that it recounts the extraordinary history of

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black American women's struggle for freedom in all aspects of their lives. By the end of the twentieth century all legal barriers to the full participation of women and people of color in American society had been removed. Though it is impossible to predict what the twenty-first century will bring, one thing is certain: the new era will be about maximizing and maintaining the gains that have been made.

Many of the women and movements in this study either are unknown or have received minimal or no treatment. Numerous studies consider the importance of race, class, and sex to black women's history, but few perceive religion or spirituality as significant factors in the shaping of women's thought and actions, or consider the multiple external historical forces that have impacted the lives of generations of African American women. It is impossible to trace the history of black women and religion without contemplating their encounter with the main currents of U.S. and, indeed, world history as exemplified in their transnational interests.

Religion has served as both a source of black women's oppression and a resource for their struggles for gender equality and social justice. Historically, religion has been *the* central guiding force in the lives of most African Americans. Speaking in 1952 about a conference where "women were considered from every angle" but there was no session on religion or philosophy, Virginia Simmons Nyabonga observed, "It was the conviction of everyone that religion and philosophy are basic threads of all existence and activity." This is the underlying premise I have used to interpret the history of black women and religion. Of central importance to this work are questions of how issues of patriarchy, sexism, and gender inequality relate to the African American community, and how issues of racism impacted not only the black community but also the interracial and women's movements. It is an interdisciplinary history that explores the race, class, gender, and religious experiences of women within the context of U.S., black, and women's history from the unique perspective of African American women.

Being black and female and faced with racism and sexism posed special problems for African American women. Unlike white women, they could not simply choose to fight sexism: for black women the chains of race were equally as binding as the chains of sex. However, through it all, most black women never forgot that whatever their struggle was with white America, the sex issue was equally as important to their survival and advancement as women of color. At the same time, they fully recognized that white America, including most white

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women, viewed them as black first and women second. Race impacted their fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, husbands and other relatives. As long as racism existed, freedom from sexism would not advance black women's social, economic, or political position in the United States.

Combining black women's experiences and perspectives while simultaneously documenting the history of black American women and their organizations, this study looks in depth at the major dimensions of African American women's lives and brings an understanding of the historical significance of religion in most aspects of black life and culture. Many black women leaders were deeply imbued with religious convictions and saw their work as a way of implementing their Christian faith. Expanding far beyond their religious institutions, they created multiple national organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women, the International Council of Women of the Darker Races, the National League of Colored Republican Women, and the National Council of Negro Women; joined white-led quasi-Christian groups such as the Young Women's Christian Association and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union; cooperated with white women in the interracial movement; and worked in numerous male-led organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Urban League, and the Universal Negro Improvement Association to advance their race, sex, religious, and social agendas.

The themes and broad outlines of women's struggle are similar for Protestant denominations and some non-Christian religions. However, most black women's organizations engaged in organized activities aimed at achieving racial and gender freedom and advancement. Religious women's organizations were differentiated mostly by their geographical and class differences. From the outset, the organizational structures and issues of most women's missionary societies and conventions were influenced by church law and the social status and political ideology of the organizations' leaders.

Scholarly work on African American women has focused almost exclusively on limited aspects of their club work or, more recently, on their discrete roles in specific religious traditions in the period after the Civil War to 1920. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's pioneering study of the women's movement in the National Baptist Convention opened up new vistas for the study of women and religion. However, in the absence of historical studies of African American women in other

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denominations, Higginbotham's *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880–1920* is often utilized to explain the experiences of all black church women. The tendency of scholars to conflate the history of the Woman's Convention, Auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention, with that of women's organizations in other denominations has created a false and monolithic history of black American women and their institutions. Covering more than two centuries of black and women's history, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* serves as a corrective to that notion and illustrates the diversity and richness of African American and women's history.

Founded in 1900, the Woman's Convention was among the last of the national black women's religious organizations to be organized. It was preceded by the African Methodist Episcopal Church's Woman's Parent Mite Missionary Society and Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Society; and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church's Woman's Home and Foreign Missionary Society. In *Engendering Church: Women, Power, and the A.M.E. Church*, sociologist Jualynne E. Dodson astutely examines how women acquired and used power within the AME Church in the late nineteenth century. In *God in My Mama's House: The Women's Movement in the CME Church*, Bishop Othal Hawthorne Lakey and Betty Beene Stephens, leaders in the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (founded as the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church), provide insight into the leadership roles of women in the CME Church. In the recently published *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World*, Anthea Butler perceptively discusses the activities of Pentecostal women in COGIC's Women's Department. There are no published full-length histories on black Catholic, Episcopalian, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, and Presbyterian women's organizations.

There is no comprehensive history of black women's organizations and their leadership. There are few comparative studies of black women that explore what it meant to be a club woman and a church woman, and how black women constructed their identities in a manner designed to merge their religious and secular experiences and environments. Utilizing the language of evangelical Christianity to argue for both gender equality in the church and community and racial equality and social change in white-dominated organizations and the American body politic, black women skillfully negotiated the different worlds in which they functioned. Several studies of religion and African Ameri-

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can history have provided some insight into the opposition black women faced in their endeavors during certain periods of time. However, few focus on the ongoing internal struggle over the meaning of black masculinity and femininity that is evident after the Civil War, escalates in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as women demand religious rights and political suffrage, and continues through the civil rights–black power movement of the late twentieth century into the twenty first century.

Critical analysis of the opposition faced by women in black churches and denominations is limited. Yet the church is the base from which African American women first launched their national crusade against sexism. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century African American women created missionary societies and women's conventions through which they obtained organizational skills and leadership training, asserted their power within the church and community, and began to speak for themselves and fight for women's rights and racial justice. They also engaged in transnational work in Africa, South America, and the Caribbean, believing that improvement of the status and image of women in Africa was necessary for the general acceptance and advancement of black women in the United States and throughout the diaspora.

The granting of political suffrage to women in the United States did not ignite the self-conscious black masculinity that was evident after World War I; rather, it inflamed it. As numerous black women embraced their newfound freedom and became more politically active and outspoken, black men felt even more threatened. The rise of laymen's and "brotherhood" religious organizations and attempts of male clergy to further control and constrict women's religious freedom after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 exemplifies the reaction of many men to the changes occurring in the national political status of women. One cannot fully understand sexism and gender discrimination in the black community without a careful evaluation and understanding of religious institutional praxis and the internal discourse over the meaning of black manhood and womanhood. Historical issues of gender, debates about class, and sexist ideologies advanced by black male leaders were often part of their quest for citizenship rights and racial equality in a white-male-dominated society that valued patriarchy. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the church was at the center of this struggle. This is reasonable and logical considering

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that historically the church has been one of the most powerful institutions in the African American community as well as the forum in which most of the first debates about racial equality, black “manhood rights,” and women’s roles and rights in the church and society occurred.

Women’s status in the religious polity owes much to the changes that have occurred in American society. Between 1830 and 1920 black women became more active in religious and public culture, exercising their agency, and contesting and debating ideas about their abilities and the place of women in the church and in public life. Their political and cultural activism was formalized in a network of secular and religious organizations through which they made substantial financial and material contributions to the black community. Imbued by ideas of freedom, and influenced by the abolitionist, women’s rights, and suffrage movements, emancipation, Reconstruction, and the growth of Jim Crow laws and practices, black women became active participants in the public discourse about the role and status of women and African Americans in the United States.

Using the church as an essential base of influence while transcending their religious traditions, in 1896 black women of all persuasions were instrumental in launching the National Association of Colored Women. Between 1896 and 1910 black women organized state federations that included a wide range of local clubs. The NACW was an interdenominational organization through which black women could surmount their religious and class differences, define and implement a central agenda, speak collectively to defend the image of black womanhood, address issues of gender and race, and effect social change relevant to their feminist/womanist and race agendas.

Constructed as an intricate network of local, state, regional, and national black female organizations, by 1900 the NACW was recognized as the leading organization of African American women. As practical feminists, or womanists, black women understood that it would be extremely difficult to achieve their goals without the support of white persons of “goodwill,” in particular white women. Carefully assessing their options, they calculated that the YWCA, as a Christian organization with major resources and a focus on working-class women and girls, would benefit their cause. Moreover, black women recognized that the YWCA connected many white social and political entities, elites whose influence could be useful for accessing resources and impacting public policy. The YWCA is an example of how the



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NACW's influence was used by black women leaders to leverage power in white organizations.

During the late nineteenth century, black church women joined the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. It was the first national white women's organization to accept black women as members, albeit in mostly separate unions. The WCTU, similar to the YWCA, was a quasi-religious organization, built on Protestant women's activism that emerged between 1830 and 1860. Organized in 1873–74, the WCTU was the largest female-led organization in the United States in the nineteenth century. During the 1890s, embracing issues of women's voting rights, the WCTU was an important factor in advancing women into public life. Although on issues such as lynching and rape the organization appeared to be antithetical to the interests of African Americans, middle-class black women leaders viewed it as an important political and social network through which they could address essential moral and social issues, reach working-class and poor black women, and have a national voice. They perceived the WCTU as an important tool for protecting the home and engaging in racial uplift and interracial work. While it continued to function, the WCTU declined in prominence after 1900. The politicization of the WCTU, especially the alliance of white WCTU activists with white-supremacist southern politicians, made the group less attractive to many black women leaders. However, temperance and prohibition were important issues in the black community during the early twentieth century.

Black religious women and their organizations were the foundation for a significant portion of what has been defined as nonreligious or secular in nature. Most women celebrated as leaders in the WCTU, the NACW, and the YWCA were officers and members of religious associations. Some women were founders and presidents and served on the boards and committees of the national and local branches of the NAACP, the National Urban League, and other black organizations. In the twentieth century black women leaders were determined to cross restrictive racial boundaries and assert themselves. They held positions on local and national interracial boards, including municipal committees, and in race relations and ecumenical organizations such as the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America and its Church Women's Committee on Race Relations, and Church Women United.

By the 1930s, black women leaders were able to maximize their



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power through their leadership positions on diverse national boards and coalition efforts with white women and black men. In effect, they were part of a powerful network of interlocking relationships and directorates whose political and social impact was felt at many levels. In a broad sense, their interlocking network consisted of groups and individuals seeking to advance black Americans' economic, political, and social interests. African American women leaders used all the tools at their disposal—contacts, influence, media, and politics—to achieve their ends. The founding of Church Women United in 1941, a watershed event in women's history, represented a consolidation of religious and secular interests. Though largely overlooked by scholars, CWU, with a network of more than ten million members, aggressively pursued a liberal feminist agenda that included social and political reform related to minorities and women.

As scholars have continued to focus almost exclusively on a select few of the individual histories of black and white organizations and their personnel, they have overlooked the very rich and complex history of organizational networks and the ways in which women functioned in, among, and across black and white, male and female, religious and secular organizations. It was the expansive vision and determination of generations of black women activists that helped to hammer down the walls of segregation and bring change in many areas of American life. It was through the collective efforts of African American church women and their organizations, and the work of individual black women in race-specific, gender-specific, biracial, and interracial associations, that the struggle for the rights of women and blacks was conducted. Women such as Alice Felts, Anna Julia Cooper, Hallie Quinn Brown, Addie Hunton, Florence Spearing Randolph, Emma Merritt, Mary Mason, Lugenia Hope, Mary McCrory, Sarah Pettey, Lethia C. Fleming, Lucy Laney, Nannie Helen Burroughs, S. Willie Layten, Mary McLeod Bethune, Maria Lawton, Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Gray Adams, Septima Poinsette Clark, Dorothy I. Height, and Claire Collins Harvey formed the core of a movement that spanned more than one hundred years.

Legions of black women who were neither leaders nor members of the "talented tenth" were the rank-and-file organizational workers in cities and towns throughout the nation. Not all of these women would be classified as middle class; a considerable number would be considered working class by today's standard. However, class definitions in the black community have historically never paralleled those of white

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Americans. Growing up in the 1950s as a middle-class black American whose early experiences were in both the North and the South, I sometimes encountered the expression “the better class of Negroes.” However, I paid little attention to its use until the late 1960s, when it was forcefully brought to my attention by a friend’s mother, a woman from Mississippi who was born into the southern mulatto elite and lived a rather privileged life. During the Civil Rights–Black Power Movement I found the term offensive and often critiqued her use of it. In hindsight, I now understand that during the early part of the twentieth century it was commonly used by black elites, particularly middle- and upper-class African Americans, who were viewed as the best representatives of the race—persons who historian Glenda Gilmore suggests “saw themselves as ambassadors to the white power structure.” It also had negative connotations and was sometimes used to separate out African Americans who did not meet the standards of individuals and organizations who used skin color and family background to discriminate within the race.

In rural areas, small towns, and cities throughout the nation, class definitions in the African American community remained rather fluid until the 1970s. Desegregation in housing opened up the opportunity for black professionals to move from traditional black urban communities to middle-class and predominantly white suburban enclaves. As a result of desegregation and new job and housing opportunities, traditionally black communities became less inclusive of different classes. However, in small cities—such as Milledgeville, Georgia, where I spent considerable time during my adolescence—a beautician, a bricklayer, a painter, a practical nurse, and a domestic servant might all be accepted into the middle class; the space between the classes was extremely narrow. In a city where the black professional class consisted of a handful of teachers and ministers, one physician, and several small-business owners, one’s class designation was related to a number of variables, including family status and lifestyle as well as membership and offices held in prominent religious, fraternal, and other secular organizations. Thus, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was common to find men and women of working-class backgrounds mingling, actively socializing, and holding leadership positions and working in race organizations with persons of the so-called “better” classes—especially at the local level. This pattern was widespread and identifiable in many communities throughout the nation.

After 1890, as evidenced by the organization of elite social clubs,

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class discrimination was on the rise in major urban areas. Nevertheless, most black Baptist and Methodist churches continued to include mixed congregations comprising the working and middle class. Class tended to be more of a factor in the separate black congregations affiliated with mainstream white-led denominations such as the Presbyterian, Episcopal, and Catholic churches than in the historically black denominations. In the early twentieth century, between 1915 and 1930, the Great Migration accelerated the movement of African Americans from rural to urban areas in the North, South, and West, changing the social and political landscape of the black community. The Great Migration also redistributed the black religious groups, aided the growth of the Baptist Church in the North and Midwest, and encouraged the development of Pentecostal, Holiness, and Spiritual churches, as well as numerous cults and sects, especially in northern and western cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, Boston, New York City, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. New patterns of worship and an expanded base of religious institutions became the norm in urban black America.

Black men and women shared experiences of oppression. However, black women were set apart by their sex and were more exposed to sexual violence and misuse of their bodies for breeding and other purposes. Used as sex objects and beasts of burden but determined to survive, many women viewed the Bible as a source of inspiration. It became an instrument of freedom and survival and a tool for development of literacy. Within the confines of slavery black women developed boundless spirituality and adopted the Bible as their guide, and Jesus Christ as their personal savior. Slave owners and southern white church leaders attempted to limit and shape the Christian experiences of the enslaved. Ignoring the white slave master's central text, "Slaves Obey your Masters," over a period of many generations black women and men molded and shaped Christianity into a complex mixture with a critical theological perspective that reinforced their sense of identity, self-worth, and personal dignity, while emphasizing freedom. Participating in diverse forms of slave worship, women played various roles.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, free black men and women were establishing religious and social reform organizations in cities such as Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, and Boston. By tracing the leadership and issues within and among these groups, a clearer picture of the origins, ideology, and organizing processes of nine-

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teenth-century reformers emerges. Of particular importance is the role of gender politics in the antebellum free black community, and the ways in which women constructed their identities as slave and free women. It is essentially during this period that African Americans articulated a national social and political agenda and laid the foundation for what became the most powerful institution in the black community—the church.

Focusing on gender interactions, leadership roles, and the strategies women mounted to deal with their subordinate position illustrates how laywomen and preaching women constructed their identities in relationship to men after 1865, and the consequences incurred when they subverted prevailing gender conventions. It reveals the issues and struggles they encountered in the creation of women's missionary societies and conventions, and in their efforts to secure laity and clergy rights and formal leadership positions. Missionary societies and women's conventions represent the apex of female leadership and power in the church. However, women have assumed other roles as well. As exhorters, ministers, musicians, leaders of prayer groups, and clergy wives they have been active participants in the creation and expansion of the power and influence of the church. More than a few women gained status and a degree of power functioning in these and other official and unofficial church roles. Of some importance is how church women parlayed and used their influence to promote the feminist and race causes of their religious and secular associations.

The main focus of church women's societies and conventions was domestic and foreign missionary work, broadly defined. As centers of religious activity, women's religious organizations were significant nonpartisan bases of power. Between 1870 and 1970 they were most important in the execution of grassroots social, educational, health, and political reform movements. Because of the sheer size of their collective membership, the Baptist and Methodist women's organizations formed a powerful national network of leaders and workers whose influence was paramount in bringing about reform, especially at the local level. Church women of all classes and persuasions embraced a commitment to religion and racial uplift by fusing these concepts and making them the most central elements of their activism. Recognizing the need for a church that was actively engaged in helping to meet the needs of its community, women's organizations launched programs aimed at providing basic social services. By 1890 their collective voluntary and organizational services constituted the backbone of black

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community philanthropy. Launching racial uplift programs on an international scale, denominational missionary boards stressed the need for improving the status of Africans and addressing a white Protestant missionary theology that promoted notions of white supremacy. Believing that Christianity could transform a society, eliminate polygamous practices, and effectuate “civilization” in Africa, black women missionaries placed a high priority on converting and uplifting women and girls.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, black women’s missionary organizations were at different stages of development. Eschewing deference to male authority, they never gave up their belief in the equality of the sexes and continuously fought for equal rights in the polity. Women variously strove to either achieve or maintain autonomy over their religious associations, to exercise control over their finances, to gain full lay and clergy rights, and to access leadership positions reserved for men. As missionary societies and conventions grew in size, scope, sophistication, and influence, they were perceived by the male clergy and lay leaders as threatening and a challenge to the central authority of the church. As the century advanced and women gained political suffrage, church women became more active in politics, expended more time on secular reform, and grew more insistent on their religious rights. African American women viewed the ballot in general, and politics in particular, as a means to advance their racial and gender goals. Nannie Burroughs perceived political activism as the essence of Christian mission. The political values and views of black women were often informed by religion, and their vote was determined as much by faith as anything else.

Christian women, in particular Baptists and Methodists, faced new problems within their denominations. They encountered internal strife in their organizations, competition with new women’s groups created to address regional and sectional differences, and denominational efforts to either control, weaken, or eliminate their associations. In the face of multiple challenges, black women never lost sight of their overall purpose and goals. They neither gave up nor relinquished their religious, race, and gender commitments, but simply pressed forward and continued to fight for what they believed was right and just.

This story is neither neat nor perfect. Rather, it is a tale of struggle and compromise as well as gain and loss. For some women’s associations, the struggle was both internal with their female colleagues and the male leadership and external with white women’s missionary orga-

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nizations, on whom they sometimes depended for financial support to launch and implement their programs. Ideological differences and issues of class, color, and status frequently lurked just beneath the surface and threatened to distract women from their purpose and derail group solidarity. In some groups, most notably the Woman's Convention, Auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention, USA, jealousy, competition for leadership positions, and internal power struggles with other women were prevalent. But the most critical problem these women faced was how to achieve their goals while maintaining solidarity with their black brothers.

Critics, pundits, and outsiders question why black women consistently cling to churches and denominations that continue to willfully exploit and deny their personhood and work. While they admire the noble struggle of black women for equality and justice in their religious institutions, they do not understand why black women refuse to use their power to force change and achieve equality and justice for their sex. Why do many black church women continue to accept second-class citizenship in the institutions they have literally built and sustained? The answer to this question is complex and difficult for many to understand, especially outsiders and whites, who tend to see race and gender as discrete subjects and who often hold blacks to a higher standard than whites. However, for black women, including those who consider themselves to be feminist, this is an issue of wholeness. It goes to the heart of who they are and the importance of family and community in their lives.

Being female is only part of the black woman's identity. In the United States, for almost four hundred years, their race has taken precedence over their sex, and has affected every aspect of their lives. As members of a racial group whose color and historical experience have combined to intensify their experience of oppression, they know the importance of community. Thus, as a practical matter, black women overwhelmingly maintain solidarity with black men in the war against the perpetuation of oppression and institutionalized racism. As long as white America continues to ignore the economic and political concerns of black Americans, black women will of necessity maintain their commitment to race organizations and institutions such as the church. Separation is not an option. For generations the church has served as a bulwark against racism, and it provided spiritual sustenance during the long years of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and discrimination. What the critics have failed to understand is that historically

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the church has been more than just *a* community institution. Rather, for many it represents a way of life and has been at the center of black life. It continues to create and connect kinship and friendship networks across generations. For many African Americans, it represents, in bold relief, the history of black people in the United States and their long struggle for freedom, equality, and justice. Simply put, the church fulfills spiritual as well as communal needs in the black community that are not addressed by any other institution in the society.

While black women continue to struggle with their black brothers and strive to bring an end to sexism within their own communities and organizations, they volunteer their time and services, raise funds, and work hard to ensure the success and stability of their churches. At critical periods in their history when they have been on the brink of achieving their goal of equality and justice in the religious polity, they have often capitulated to the male clergy and accepted less than they bargained for. In part, they have accepted incremental changes and made concessions in order to keep their institutions strong and viable.

In a community defined by generations of discrimination and neglect, economic depression and educational deprivation, and fraught with violence from within and without, black women are committed to doing whatever it takes to support their families and institutions. Moreover, black women see black men as an endangered species that continues to be under assault in the larger society. They lament the fact that so many young black men are incarcerated and that there is a scarcity of men to marry. They are critically aware of and scarred by the brutal history of black male emasculation, lynching, and the rape of black women at the hands of white America; the vicious racial stereotyping and denial of the humanity of people of African descent; the demeaning Jim Crow segregation and discrimination; and the continued struggle of people of color for simple justice. This never-ending saga frames black women's experience and helps to explain their ongoing struggle for both racial and gender justice.

After 1920, Pentecostal women's associations were active in mostly urban areas. They administered primarily to their own members' needs and rarely engaged in electoral politics. Little attention has been given to the role of black women in mainstream white-dominated groups such as the Presbyterian, Episcopal, Congregational, and Catholic denominations. This is in part because the majority of African Americans—at least 90 percent—historically have held membership in black churches, in particular the Methodist and Baptist



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denominations. It is equally, if not more, difficult to locate the records of black women's organizations and leaders of mainstream religious traditions. Secondary sources for the founding and early development of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, for instance, primarily cover the nineteenth century. It is not easy to find or access data relating to the Sisters of the Holy Family and other black Catholic sisterhoods. And scholarship on black Catholic laywomen and their organizations is scarce. Thus, the organizational work of black Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Congregational, and Catholic women's organizations and the church-related work of many significant feminist activists has been virtually ignored and viewed as separate and unimportant.

The relationship of religion and politics in the lives of black women is extremely important. Churches have been fundamental to the political work of African American women. Nannie Helen Burroughs defined the importance of the church within the community as "The Negro church means the Negro woman." In other words, the African American church as an institution would not exist without the membership and financial support of black women. Black church women and their organizations were a potent factor in the social and political reform movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They addressed a broad range of issues, including temperance, education, health, protection of women and children, lynching, suffrage, segregation, and discrimination.

The majority of black women leaders were affiliated with and regularly attended a church. In fact, this was understood to be a requirement for membership in some secular organizations as well as for leadership in community organizations. For example, in 1915, Minnie Wright of Boston outlined the qualifications for clubs wishing to become members of the Northeastern Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, one of four regional affiliates of the National Association of Colored Women. Wright asserted that clubs must be engaged in charitable work and that "all members must be connected with some church." Whether or not this requirement extended to all members of the NACW or was exclusive to the Northeastern Federation is not clear. However, most middle-class black leaders agreed with Judge Robert H. Terrell, who believed that persons who were not religious, or who did not attend a church, were not fit to lead any organization. Until the 1970s, church leadership was an important recommendation for community leadership.

Black religious women's work in the public sphere before and after

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the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment was extensive. Of particular concern are the ways in which black church women functioned as political operatives in gender- and race-specific organizations as well as their individual and collective efforts of social and political reform. Though some scholars have suggested that the black community was dominated by conservatism, assimilationism, and an inclination to withdraw “from political and social involvement in their communities,” this was not the case. In many northern churches, African Americans were politically active, especially in electoral politics. Though blacks in most southern cities were disfranchised, there are numerous examples of women and men who engaged in protest activities aimed at disfranchisement, lynching, and discrimination in general. During the years leading up to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and ’60s, black women throughout the nation, including areas of the South, were active in organizing suffrage associations and participating in various kinds of political activities.

In the North and West, black women not only voted but also sought political office. Laywomen and their organizations were actively involved in politics. Their political influence was sometimes limited by their lack of access to the franchise, but they found ways to implement their reform agendas and influence public policy issues through use of their associational network, including social, church, club, and interracial organizations. Using their religious and secular bases of power, especially the missionary societies, women’s conventions, and the NACW, they aggressively pursued, organized, and led electoral operations. After 1920, more black women engaged in politics and ran for political office and in 1924 a cadre of NACW women leaders founded the National League of Colored Republican Women. Women such as Rev. Florence Spearing Randolph, S. Willie Layten, Maria C. Lawton, Mary Church Terrell, Lethia Fleming, and Nannie Burroughs were in the vanguard of those who saw the need for a national political organization through which they could educate and organize black women voters at the local and state levels. They skillfully used politics to address public policy issues relevant to the status of women and African Americans.

Where they lacked access to traditional political means, black women developed other strategies for achieving their goals. Utilizing their religious and social networks, they accessed resources to establish state institutions for delinquent black girls, argued for international peace, and lobbied for legislation to eradicate lynching and other

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forms of racial intimidation and violence. In addition to the NACW and the YWCA, the Eastern Star and the Daughter Elks—quasi-religious organizations—also served as resources for black women’s political activism. In writing about the political organizing of church women, I became critically aware of the significant political role played by the Masons and the Elks. The Eastern Star and the Daughter Elks were female auxiliaries to the Masons and the Elks. Numerous women joined these organizations, but neither has received sustained scholarly treatment.

During the first half of the twentieth century African American women played an integral role in organizations and institutions struggling for what was considered radical social change. They engaged in separate institution-building efforts and participated in interracial coalitions that crossed religious and secular boundaries. The interracial and interdenominational movements launched by the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ and Church Women United provided fertile ground for black Christian feminist activists to pursue their goals of social justice and equality. These movements were dependent on networking in and among black and white religious and secular organizations, in particular the astute use of certain modes of public discourse, including public speaking and the broadcast and print media, to mobilize supporters, publicize and disseminate information, and develop strategy.

An analysis of the roots of the interracial movement reveals the struggle of black and white women to “cross the divide” and establish meaningful relationships based on mutual understanding and respect for each other. In the 1920s the FCC’s Church Women’s Committee on Race Relations was responsible for organizing the first national interracial conference of church women and for setting the agenda for much of the work later accomplished by Church Women United. CWU was an active force in helping to lay the groundwork for the Civil Rights–Black Power Movement of the 1950s and ’60s. Founded in 1940, it became the most powerful national and interracial organization of women. Exploring the efforts of CWU’s national leadership to foster interracial cooperation and integration illustrates the limits of their strategy. Middle-class white women leaders such as Dorothy Tilly, Lillian Smith, and numerous others worked for decades to break down the barriers of segregation and discrimination in their churches and communities; by steadily chipping away the veneer of southern racism, these women succeeded in undermining and weakening the

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southern system of segregation and in helping to lay the groundwork for dismantling the legal basis for racial discrimination. However, the majority of white Christians—female and male—found it difficult to fully overcome the racial contexts in which they lived.

Motivated by their deep religious convictions and belief in the moral righteousness of their struggle, black women worked long and hard within their organizations and in the interracial church movement to address basic issues of human rights, and to create strategies to improve the economic, social, and political status of females, blacks, and other minorities. Desegregation and self-determination were cornerstones of their philosophy. For African American women, these concerns were not simply civil rights, but were central to the basic tenets of Christianity and self-identity. Their organizational work focused on issues of civil rights covers at least eight decades, extending from the 1890s to the 1970s. Following the Civil War, African American women engaged in the ongoing debate about black “citizenship rights.” While the term “civil rights” was not widely used before the 1940s, black women’s organizations were active in campaigns prior to the 1950s to protest lynching, segregation, and discrimination in education, and to lobby for voting, public accommodations, housing, and employment—which they defined as citizenship rights. Some black women’s organizations, such as the Baptist-led Women’s Political Council in Montgomery, Alabama, developed strategies at the local and national levels to advance the civil rights of African Americans, and played an important role in launching the modern Civil Rights Movement, which began with the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision and ended with the 1965 passage of the Voting Rights Act by Congress. The main focus of women’s organizational work in the South during the latter period was on the implementation of the *Brown* decision and subsequent legislation outlawing segregation and discrimination in voting and public accommodations.

The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 represented the end of legal racial segregation and second-class citizenship for African Americans and other nonwhite minorities in the United States. After 1965, the nation’s focus shifted to issues of the student rights, antiwar, women’s liberation, and black power movements. During the late 1960s and in the early ’70s black women focused on critical economic and social issues that remained unresolved, and gave serious consideration to the relationship of black women to the women’s rights movement. They engaged in an exten-

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sive self-analysis and evaluation of their status in the church and society. The ongoing discourse and intense scrutiny of sexism in society invaded the religious domain and served as a catalyst for the escalating demands for the male clergy to recognize women's gifts and grant them full equality in the religious polity.

As African American men in mainstream denominations such as the Presbyterian and Episcopalian churches embraced the tenets of black power and the emerging theologies of liberation, they demanded acknowledgment of a black theology and reparations. This resulted in the formation of black and women's caucuses and task forces. In 1981, black women in the Episcopal Church reacted to their marginalization within these groups, and articulated their concerns regarding the lack of consideration given women of color in the women's liberation movement. Determined to be heard and have black women's issues addressed, they defined the "Black Women's Agenda," the first articulation of a new ideology that became known as womanist theology. This movement was profoundly influenced by the struggles of black women with black theology and white feminism. "Womanism" made its formal debut in 1985 at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature. During the last two decades the movement has expanded, and its tenets are now embraced by a diversity of scholars in a variety of fields.

Many of the black and white women and organizations that appear in these pages were well known at one time. Their lives and their work not only fill in the gaps in American and African American, religious, and women's history; they also tell a complex but consistent and more complete story about America, one that includes the vision and faith of the countless women who struggled to break down the barriers and make the United States what it is today.