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TRACIE D. JACOBS

# AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN ELDERS IN ADVENTIST CONGREGATIONS

**Abstract:** Historically, African-American women have been influential in building and expanding the role of the African-American church as well as their role within the church. Because their leadership is critical for the health of the church, it is important to understand how African-American local church women lead. The purpose of this study was to describe the leadership practices of African-American women elders in the Lake Region Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Results from the Leadership Practices Inventory show that the elders and their observers rate Encourage the Heart, Enable Others to Act, Model the Way, and Inspire a Shared Vision higher than a national sample. While Challenge the Process was somewhat lower on the survey, it was clear from the interviews that the women were fundamentally challenging the process as they served as elders in their churches.

**Keywords:** *African-American, women church elders, Seventh-day Adventist*

## Introduction

Historically, African-American women have been leaders in their homes, churches, and communities (Mosley-Anderson, 2001). African-American women were influential in building and expanding the role of the African-American church as well as their role within the church (Turner, 2007). However, the African-American local church woman elder has been mentioned only rarely in scholarly research, in spite of her commitment to the church (McNeal & Schaller, 1994). Yet at least 70% of most African-American congregations are women (Davis, 1981).

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There has been limited research specifically describing the contribution the African-American woman elder has made and is making to the local church congregation. The purpose of this study was to investigate the leadership practices of the African-American women elders in the Lake Region Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The Lake Region Conference was organized in 1945. With its main office in Chicago, Illinois, the Lake Region covers a territory of five states: Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, with 27,541 members (75% African-American, 20% Hispanic, and 5% White) in 118 churches. The population for this study included 45 African-American women elders in this conference.

## **Conceptual Framework**

“A standpoint refers to a particular position or angle of vision in which an individual experiences his or her life” (Coker, 2003, p. 659). Theory grounds how researchers identify, name, interpret, and write about individual and collective experiences. It can be challenging to find and apply theoretical constructs that are appropriate for explaining and understanding the experiences of Black women. To try to interpret the experience in a fair and just manner, one must have the proper theoretical lens. Thus it is important to identify a theory that reflects Black women’s political and social positions and that of others with whom they interact in the world. This study used Black Feminist Thought and transformational leadership as the theoretical lenses to help interpret the way African-American Adventist women elders lead in their churches.

### *Black Feminist Thought*

A Black feminist framework takes into account the intersectional dynamics of race, class, and gender (Coker, 2003). While this framework provides a platform to examine and better comprehend the commonalities that exist between Black women, it also recognizes differences among Black women. Black feminists argue that Black women’s perspectives are grounded in their unique experiences (McClish & Bacon, 2002). A review of the extensive work of Collins (1986, 1990, 1997, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2005) served as a primary source to offer a conceptual framework for comprehending Black Feminist Thought.

The ideology of Black Feminist Thought declares that visibility of Black women asserts self-determination and self-definition as essential, challenges the interlocking nature of oppression, and presumes an image of Black women as powerful and independent subjects (Collins, 1986;

King, 1988). A self-determined person is one who has the power to decide one's own destiny just as a self-realized person has the power to name one's own reality (Collins, 2000a).

The general purpose of Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000a) is to resist the practices and ideology generated by oppression. For Black women, the impact of institutional racism, sexism, and discrimination based on class remains observable and tangible. According to Collins, the common experiences generated by these existing conditions mean that Black women live in a different world than those who are not Black and women. These conditions amplify the need for a conceptual framework that distinguishes Black Feminist Thought from other feminist schools of thought. Black Feminist Thought distinguishes itself from feminist ideology by five features: experience and consciousness, legacy of struggle, dialogic relationship, Black women intellectuals, and significance of change (Collins, 2000a).

### *Transformational Leadership*

Transformational leadership emphasizes participative decision making, collaboration, and teamwork. Hooijberg and Choi (2000) conducted an oral interview with Bernard Bass and revealed a summary of their thoughts on transformational leadership. Hooijberg and Choi noted that transformational leaders are change agents in an organization. Thus, transformational leaders are sometimes associated with charismatic qualities. Charismatic leadership is an important component of transformational leadership as well as inspirational leadership, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. According to Hooijberg and Choi, Bernard Bass thought that the most important quality of transformational leaders was being able to inspire an organization to exceed beyond its expectations. But in order to inspire, the transformational leader must maintain high morals and values, and be trusted by followers. Trust is a major component of transformational leadership (Bass, 1998; Burns, 1978).

Transformational leadership follows specific themes, questions assumptions, and supports non-traditional thinking. Traditional thinking is not an option for transformational leaders, because their focus is change. Thus, transformational leaders focus on followers' development, as well as supporting and guiding individuals. They become role models for the organization. Moreover, transformational leaders involve all followers in the democratic process of decision making for the organization (Tucker & Russell, 2004).

Transformational leaders display positive characteristics. They are

encouragers instead of dictators. These leaders engage in organizational functioning in a consistent manner as they encourage all members of the organization to see themselves as an addition of value within the organization.

Shrivers-Blackwell (2004) defined a transformational leader as one who is a visionary and communicates the future vision of the organization as a shared responsibility from all stakeholders. A transformational leader serves as a coach or mentor for the organization.

## **Research Design**

A sequential mixed methodology was used to answer the research questions (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). The rationale for combining both quantitative and qualitative data in this study was to obtain statistical, quantitative results from the group and then follow up with a few individuals to explore more deeply using the qualitative method. This mixed-method approach allowed a comparison of the information as expressed by the women during the semi-structured interviews with the data obtained during the survey research component. A demographic survey provided data to assist in answering the research questions. The additional quantitative research included the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI-Self/LPI-Other), created by Kouzes and Posner (2003). This inventory measures five leadership practices: Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Enable Others to Act, Encourage the Heart, and Challenge the Process. The following numerical values represent the frequency of use of the leadership behaviors: 55+ = “almost always,” 50-54 = “very frequently,” 45-49 = “usually,” 40-44 = “fairly often,” 35-39 = “sometimes,” 30-34 = “occasionally,” 25-29 = “once in a while,” 20-24 = “seldom,” 15-19 = “rarely,” and 10-14 = “almost never.”

The second part of the research was qualitative and included semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of African-American women local church elders who serve in the Lake Region Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. The selection of the sample was based on (a) experience (more than 5 years in office), (b) size of congregation (membership of more than 100), and (c) scores on their Leadership Practices Inventory.

## **Findings**

The results show that of the 22 African-American women elders who responded to the demographic survey, the majority were in the 51-60 years of age category (54.5%). The next largest group was the 65+

(27.27%) category. The majority of the elders were married (59%), 27% were widowed, and 4.5% were in each category of single, divorced, and separated. More than 31% of them had served 3-4 years, 27% had served 10 or more years, and 22.7% from 0-2 years.

### *Quantitative Findings*

**Research Question #1.** What are the leadership practices of African-American women elders in the Lake Region Conference as perceived by themselves and by members of their congregation?

African-American women elders in this study described themselves as “very frequently” using the Encourage the Heart ( $M = 51.9, SD = 5.4$ ) and Enable Others to Act ( $M = 51.7, SD = 6.4$ ) leadership practices. They believed that they “usually” Model the Way ( $M = 47.7, SD = 7.6$ ), Inspire a Shared Vision ( $M = 47.0, SD = 9.4$ ), and Challenge the Process ( $M = 45.0, SD = 10.5$ ) (See Figure 1). All five practices were rated higher than the national sample except for Challenge the Process, which was rated 45 by the elders in contrast to 47 by the national sample.

Forty observers or church members reported that their elders “very frequently” (50-54) demonstrated all five leadership practices (See Figure 1).

**Research Question #2.** Are there significant differences between self-perceived leadership practices and member-perceived leadership practices?

A paired sample t-test was conducted to examine differences between self-rated leadership practices and the ratings of observers. Using 0.05 as the level of significance, statistically significant differences were found for Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, and Challenge the Process. Members’ ratings on these three practices are significantly higher than elders’ ratings. The magnitude of the group differences is moderate, with effect sizes ranging from 0.45 to 0.59. No group differences were found for Enable Others to Act and Encourage the Heart.

**Research Question #3.** To what extent are leadership practices related to years of experiences as elder and size of congregation?

Twelve women had fewer than 5 years of experience as an elder, and 10 women had 5 or more years of experience. The t-test results indicate no statistically significant differences in leadership practices between those with fewer than 5 years and those with 5 or more years of experience as elders.

There were no statistically significant differences between the elders who functioned in a congregation with fewer than 100 members and those who were in congregations of 100 or more members.

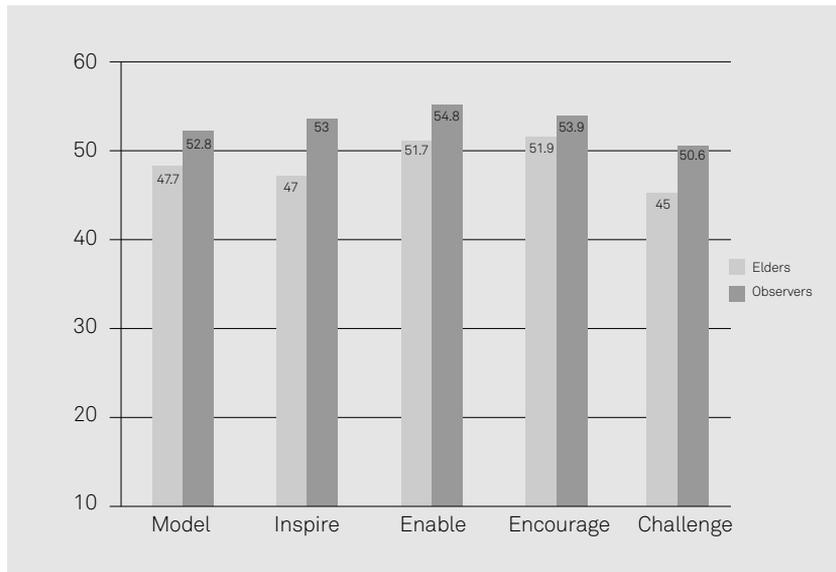


Figure 1. Summary of elders' and observers' LPI.

## Qualitative Findings

**Research Question #4.** How do African-American women elders describe their leadership practices?

This research question was answered primarily through interviews with five purposely chosen elders: Dorothy, Bernice, Carol, Donna and Barbara (pseudonyms). The themes from the interviews are presented according to the five leadership practices.

**Encourage the Heart.** African-American women elders in this study rated themselves highest in the leadership practice Encourage the Heart (51.9). Dorothy, Bernice, and Carol discussed specifically how they encouraged their congregations in various ways and as a natural part of their leadership style. Dorothy enjoys sitting and talking with single mothers and encouraging them to always remember how important their children are, and that they need to stay strong in the Lord to keep their children close to Jesus. She lets them know they can do it and that they must do it for their precious children. She always shows special interest in them and their children.

Dorothy also encourages the senior women to stay involved in the church, not to sit down and “retire” but to remember that they are the “pillars” of the church and must continue to hold up the “standards” and stay “involved” and “don’t get tired.” She reminds them to stay encouraged because “God hasn’t brought you this far to leave you.”

Donna has served her congregation for 12 years, and the majority of

the time she has been the first elder. This church congregation is relatively small, approximately 200 members, so she is continually encouraging the members to stretch, to develop, to try new things and new ways of service that they may not have thought of before. She finds herself like a coach, continually encouraging members to step into positions in which they may not feel comfortable but for which she can see that they have the ability to serve.

Believing in others is an extraordinarily powerful force in propelling performance. Feeling affirmed and appreciated increases a person's sense of self-worth, which in turn precipitates success in all areas of one's life. If we have someone in our life who believes in us, and who constantly reinforces that belief when interacting with us, we're strongly influenced by that support (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, p. 286).

**Enable Others to Act.** Another leadership practice that was rated high (51.7) by the elders was Enable Others to Act. This practice is defined in the following ways: "I develop cooperative relationships among the people I work with," "I actively listen to diverse points of view," and "I treat others with dignity and respect."

Dorothy states that "serving as first elder for over 12 years with a group of 12 talented men only works because we trust each other and have a strong positive relationship. We work well together as a team. We share information and tend to be unselfish." Bernice says, "God has given us all gifts, so I try to encourage people to get out of their comfort zones and to allow God to grow them." This is the theme that seemed to flow through all the interviews regarding Enabling Others to Act. For example, Donna said she "learned to enable members to work through issues without relying on her to take it and work it out for them." She says she has "learned to direct them to the person—whether it is the pastor or another elder, or another church member—that they need to talk with."

Kouzes and Posner (2007) describe those who score high in Enable Others to Act as those who foster collaboration. These leaders have to be skilled in two essentials: they must (a) create a climate of trust, as Dorothy did with the elders she worked with, and (b) facilitate relationships, as Donna did with the church members. Collaboration is a critical competency for achieving and sustaining high performance. In a world that is trying to do more with less, competitive strategies naturally lose out to strategies that promote collaboration.

Leaders need to build people up, give them information, allow them to take risks, and give them more discretion and authority. Effective leaders

understand that it is one of their main responsibilities to build the leadership capacity of all individuals within the organization (Kouzes & Posner, 2002).

Leadership is about making people feel that they are crucial components of the organization and that the contribution they make is critical to the success of the organization. Kouzes and Posner (2002) describe it this way:

Constituents neither perform at their best nor stick around for very long if their leaders make them feel weak, dependent, or alienated. When a leader makes people feel strong and capable—as if they can do more than they ever thought was possible—they’ll give it their all and exceed their own expectations. (pp. 18-19)

Donna was a great example of building up an individual when she worked with the choir director who discovered that the church organist was being paid but she was not. The choir director, feeling unappreciated and devalued, had decided to quit the position. But Donna spent time with her, talked with her, prayed with her, and assured her of her value to the church and how critical she was to the success of the worship service of the church. Donna was able to help her to see that she was a crucial component of the success of the church, and that she was valued and capable.

Blanchard (1999) believes that leadership “is not something you do to people. It’s something you do with people” (p. 140). Kouzes and Posner (2002) take it a step further and point out that leadership is a team effort. After reviewing their research, they found that the most effective leaders used the word “we” more often than the word “I.” They cite an example of a leader’s using “we” three times more than “I” when describing a recent success within the organization. It is clear that the leader in this example is committed to the people on her team and shares the joys of the accomplishments with them.

**Model the Way.** The next highest leadership practice (47.7) was Model the Way, which used the following descriptors: “I set a personal example of what I expect from others,” “I follow through on the promises and commitments that I make,” and “I ask for feedback on how my actions affect other people’s performance.”

Dorothy stated that it is important to her to have a vibrant, personal relationship with Jesus and to model that relationship to others. Although the others did not state their modeling exactly that way, this theme did run through all of the elders interviewed. Bernice said that she thinks it is important for her to keep herself spiritually alive and vibrant

to be an example to others. Every one of the elders modeled strong convictions in their words and actions.

Barbara would lead out in personal ministries and Bible studies. She was passionate about evangelism. She would have Bible studies in homes, and she would attend conferences and bring back evangelistic material from the conference to share with the church and with different departments. Many times she would finance her own trips to attend conferences throughout the country to bring back material. Barbara was so passionate about evangelism that she would coordinate the music with different churches of various denominations so that their choirs would be in attendance at the evangelistic meetings.

Kouzes and Posner (2007) support the value of Model the Way. They discuss it as follows:

People admire most those who believe strongly in something, and who are willing to stand up for their beliefs. If anyone is ever to become a leader who others willingly follow, one certain prerequisite is that they must be someone of “principle.” (p. 46)

They explain further:

You must know what you care about. If you don’t care, how can you expect others to do so? If you don’t burn with desire to be true to something you hold passionately, how can you expect commitment from others? And until you get close enough to the flame to feel the heat, how can you know the source? You can only be authentic when you lead according to the principles that matter most to you. (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 50)

**Inspire a Shared Vision.** Inspire a Shared Vision was rated 47.0 by the African-American elders (“I talk about future trends that will influence how our work gets done,” “I describe a compelling image of what our future could be like,” and “I appeal to others to share an exciting dream of the future”).

Dorothy says she served the church for over 20 years as head deaconess and wanted women to be able to see the possibility of serving as an elder in the church. She has a vision for women serving as elders just as they serve in any other area of the church. Bernice believes in empowering people to be the best that they can be. She finds that many members don’t feel that they have value, or worth, or gifts that they can offer God. But Bernice shares the vision that “you are someone in Christ, and God has given you special gifts.”

Barbara inspires her church and community by her enthusiastic leadership and passionate commitment and service to the Lord that is punctuated by compelling images of future programs. Carol believes that we

inspire others when we do something ourselves. She believes that people are inspired when they see leaders willing to actually live the lives and do the things that they want to inspire others to do. Carol's life is an inspiration because she is always stretching herself to new levels of growth. She is continually inspiring her congregation through her example and then challenging them to higher levels of growth. Donna is an inspiration in consistency and dedication to her congregation and her community.

Kouzes and Posner (2002) speak of Inspire a Shared Vision:

Exemplary leaders are forward-looking. They are able to gaze across the horizon of time and imagine the greater opportunities to come . . . . But it's not just the leader's vision. It's a shared vision. . . . When visions are shared they attract more people, sustain higher levels of motivation, and withstand more challenges than those that are singular. (p. 105)

**Challenge the Process.** Challenge the Process was rated lowest by the African-American women elders at 45.0. ("I seek out challenging opportunities that test my skills and abilities," "I challenge people to try out new and innovative ways to do their work," and "I experiment and take risks, even when there is a chance of failure"). The theme of change agent ran through all of the interviews and yet this leadership practice does not surface in the elders' Leadership Practices Inventory results.

The first examples of Challenging the Process comes from Dorothy. She shared about being on the rostrum with a pastor who was against women elders. Dorothy said that the Lord gave her the courage to sit there. She did not get up and leave because she felt that in doing so she would be hurting herself—that would show that she didn't have the confidence in God that He would handle the situation. "I don't see what the problem was," Dorothy said. "I see ladies as Sabbath School superintendents. I see them singing and teaching Sabbath School class. I don't see why being an elder should be any problem." She said that she had to just quietly serve when she was first elected even though the other elders, including the first elder, did not approve of women elders.

All of the elders interviewed had challenges regarding serving as elders; they all "challenged the process" in their own way. Bernice mentioned that it was "difficult" to serve as a woman elder in her church. Although she was not the first (she was the third), the two before her had "failed" in various ways, so the church was "skeptical" of a woman serving as an elder.

Barbara shared that she could not believe that Christian people could act so negative simply because she was elected to serve as an elder. It

was very painful for her when two of the strongest church elders withdrew their membership and transferred to another church. And it hurt badly because these were people whom she had gotten to know as though they were family members. She felt very bad about the situation because people misunderstood her motives:

[It was] not my thought to get the position to in any way unseat or take any power from the males. But I felt that being an elder was the work that the Lord gave me to do. That is how I felt and I still feel that way. It was painful, but I just accept it now and know that God is the head of the church.

In spite of all of this obvious practice of Challenging the Process, neither the elders nor the church members scored the elders high in this area.

Nevertheless, Kouzes and Posner (2007) make it clear that it is important to challenge the process:

Leaders search for opportunities to change the status quo. They look for innovative ways to improve the organization. In doing so, they experiment and take risks. And because leaders know that risk taking involves mistakes and failures, they accept the inevitable disappointments as learning opportunities. (p. 168)

Dorothy and all of the women elders would agree that it's worth the risk. They are convinced that when they were asked to serve as an elder, God was calling them for His service at that specific time and it was not an accident; they made the decision with a strong dedication and sense of purpose.

## Discussion

One of the most surprising findings in this study was that the women elders, as rated by themselves and their observers, scored higher than a national sample on four of the five leadership practices. This is quite amazing; it really affirms that God is using women elders in the African-American churches in a substantial way.

African-American women elders and their members in this study rated Encourage the Heart and Enable Others to Act as leadership practices that are used "very frequently." It should come as no surprise that these areas of leadership practices would rise to the top for African-American women elders. Kouzes and Posner (2007) described the leadership practice of Encourage the Heart as leaders who work hard to keep hope and determination alive, leaders who recognize contributions that individuals make, and leaders who celebrate accomplishments and make people feel like heroes. The elders in this study saw their mission as encouragers; they definitely were there to "keep hope alive" in all situations.

African-American women in general see themselves in that way. They are the ones who will encourage their families to believe in themselves even when they are living in public housing and wearing the same clothes every day and the kids make fun of them. Many successful African-American people look back and credit their strong, encouraging mothers or grandmothers who, despite the odds, were always there to encourage them. That is why Encourage the Heart leadership practice may not always fit into the boxes of the survey because sometimes it involves “tough love,” as the elders shared in their interviews. Along with the affirmations and “pats on the back,” the elders shared that sometimes the encouragement had to come with a stern face and “straight talk” to let the members know the important role they play in the church family and in the lives of their children and family.

Kouzes and Posner (2007) described leaders who score high on the leadership practice Enable Others to Act: they are people who foster collaboration and actively involve others, they understand what mutual respect is, they strive to create an atmosphere of trust and human dignity, and they strengthen others, making each person feel capable and powerful. A moment of reflection on history reveals this, too, as unsurprising. Although many African-American women have not been in a tangible “struggle” that can be seen, there is a commonality of history and, according to Collins (1990), all African-American women share the common experience of being Black women in a society that denigrates women of African descent. This commonality of experience suggests that certain characteristic themes will be prominent in a Black woman’s standpoint (p. 22). There are elements of a Black woman’s life that she will have in common with another Black woman based solely on their lived experiences.

As Black Feminist Theory explains, no one Black feminist platform exists; rather, there is a long and rich tradition of Black Feminist Theory. Much of it has been handed down orally through the generations by Black women in their roles as mothers, teachers, musicians, and preachers, utilizing the rich oral tradition of ancestors within faith communities, sewing circles, civic/social organizations, and in learning communities (June, 2007; Wilson, 2009).

African-American women learned early the skills of collaboration and the ability to develop an atmosphere of trust and human dignity. This happened in their homes and neighborhoods as they encouraged and also developed groups and teams for accomplishing goals. Their leadership skills were developed as they sought to build their children’s self-

esteem, to maintain neighborhoods, schools, and communities, and to build and maintain churches. The skills of developing teams, celebrating accomplishments, and continually making people feel capable and powerful were skills that were developed as their leadership grew out of necessity to accomplish the mission that they felt called by God to fulfill.

Challenge the Process leadership practice tends to rank in the bottom half of all lists. One explanation for this may be that many African-American women have been socialized to lead without being identified as the leader, particularly when working with African-American men. “Just plant the idea in your husband’s mind and let him believe that it is his idea,” it has often been said to wives. “He will accept it and there will be no tension.” So the wife learns to communicate ideas in such a way, and the husband comes to believe that it is his idea, and things move forward. Though the wife and even the children know that the leadership is actually coming from her, this process is used to protect the idea of masculinity and “headship” and “leadership” of the home.

Then the woman moves into the church where, again, even if she is in the leadership role as elder, still she is protective of the male ego, so she walks carefully and circumspectly around the idea of leadership, continually working with the males to avoid stripping them of their “dignity” as a man. So the woman elder very seldom challenges the process in an open forum such as board meeting or church business meeting. Instead, she uses other methods such as telephone and small-group conversations to move the idea forward and challenge the process. Consequently, change does happen, though sometimes slowly and imperceptibly, with many aware of neither the source of the idea nor of the energy that moved the idea forward. Although there are exceptions to this method, many African-American women tend to often slip into this coping style.

Due to this indirect coping style, neither the woman elder nor the observers could recognize the elder as a change agent, as actually Challenging the Process. Reflection on the interviews, however, reveals that all of these African-American women elders had to “challenge the process” to be serving as elders in their congregations. Initially, they all had negative experiences when they were selected to serve as elders, so they had to challenge the ongoing process of serving as elders in leadership roles that previously had been limited to men.

Kouzes and Posner (2007) said this: “Leadership isn’t about challenge for challenge’s sake. It’s not about shaking things up just to keep people on their toes. It’s about challenge for meaning’s sake. It’s about challenge with passion. It’s about living life on purpose” (p. 173). Living on purpose

means that you are living your life with a sense of commitment rather than by accident. Dorothy and all of the women elders were convinced when they were asked to serve as elders that God was calling them for His service at that specific time; it was not an accident, and they made the decision with a strong dedication and sense of purpose.

African-American women utilize the transformational leadership style far more than any other approach (Watson, 2004). This style has been called “visionary” and “inspirational.” Throughout this study we see examples of the “inspirational” leadership of elders like Dorothy, who inspired the elders she served with, the young women she counseled, and the senior women she motivated to continue to work as “pillars of faith” in the church. We have seen “visionary” examples in all of these elders. One example in particular is Bernice. She talked about the vision that she has for the members who don’t feel that they have a lot of value or self-worth, and she shares with them the vision that she has of them regarding how God sees them. She keeps telling them, “You are someone in Christ, and God has given you special gifts.”

As was mentioned earlier, Kouzes and Posner (2007) describe the high scorers on Enable Others to Act as those who foster collaboration, and at the heart of collaboration is trust, which is the central issue in human relationships within and outside organizations. Without trust, you cannot lead. Without trust, you cannot get extraordinary things done. Trusting leaders nurture openness, involvement, personal satisfaction, and high levels of commitment to excellence. They are willing to ante up first in the game of trust; they listen and learn from others, and they demonstrate their trust by sharing information and resources with others (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 227).

I also found Black Feminist Thought theory to be very prominent throughout this study. Black Feminist Thought is specific in its integration, validation, and centering of Black women’s realities (Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnett, 2003; Stephens & Phillips, 2005), which incorporates nurturing, openness, involvement, personal satisfaction, and openness and involvement with their congregations. The level of trust was evident in the fact that these elders were called on to mediate and to listen to hurt, pain, and confidential situations.

This group of elders lives with a high level of commitment to excellence because they all have a passionate love for the Lord. Their zeal and dedication are obvious as they talk about their experiences of service. With each of these elders’ unique personalities, there was a core of steadfast faithfulness coupled with genuine love for God and for their church.

My conversations with them made it clear that it would not make a difference if they were serving as an elder or an usher, they would have the same leadership and same commitment to service because their service is for the Lord.

## **Recommendations**

This study on leadership practices of African-American women elders in the Lake Region Conference of Seventh-day Adventists is significant because it expands the body of knowledge on leadership to include a population that is currently invisible in published research. As a result of this expansion of knowledge, some recommendations emerge from this study.

### *Recommendations for Church Leaders*

1. Leaders should recognize the contributions of the African-American women elders in the Seventh-day Adventist Church and continue to give them opportunities to follow God's call to serve as elders.
2. Conferences should develop directories of African-American women elders to facilitate a mentoring network.

### *Recommendations for African-American Women Elders in the Seventh-day Adventist Church*

1. These women elders should embrace their unique view of the world and of leadership. They need to recognize that they bring value to the group because they are different, and they broaden the elders' perspective by sharing their point of view.
2. They should both seek out mentors who can provide spiritual and emotional support for them and establish mentoring relationships with younger women in the church.

### *Recommendations for Further Research*

This research needs to be developed with a larger study base. Examples include duplicate studies of African-American women elders in (a) the Lake Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists or other unions; (b) other conferences, such as the South Central Conference or Northeastern Conference; (c) a number of conferences combined together; or (d) a nationwide study.

Since this research was limited to the Lake Region Conference, further research encompassing a wider geographical area would be beneficial. This study has set the pace for further comparative research on African-

American Adventist women in leadership, a group that has long needed further study.

Finally, as I ponder the amazing courage, wisdom, love, compassion, and dedication I found in these women, I am forced to reflect again on Cooper's words:

By not telling our own stories, it would leave us detached from our feelings, our voice, our intelligence, and cut off, which in turn leaves scars—scars we have hidden too long and for which we are paying a great price. Telling our own stories . . . can heal those scars and leave us more whole. (Cooper, 1991, p. 111)

I pray that God has blessed me to be able to add to our story.

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