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# Philanthropy and the Black Church:

A Necessary Collaborative

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The Philanthropy and Black Church Project of the twentieth century raised awareness about the need for collaboration. The 2023 Symposium on Philanthropy and the Black Church revisited that earlier effort and explored the possibility of collaboration today. Speakers discussed how Black churches serve their communities, and why foundations may be reluctant to partner with them despite common concerns.



## On April 27-28, 2023,

the Center for the Church and the Black Experience at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary and Lake Institute on Faith & Giving at the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy co-hosted a [Symposium on Philanthropy and the Black Church](#). This special event brought together 70 key leaders in philanthropy and faith to start a conversation about the “necessary collaborative” between philanthropy and Black religious institutions, with attention to past efforts to build this relationship and careful consideration of challenges and opportunities in our own time.

The idea for the Symposium began as a conversation back in 2020 between Elizabeth Lynn of Lake Institute on Faith & Giving, Sidney Williams of Crossing Capital Group and the Oikos Institute for Social Impact, and Reggie Blount of the Center for the Church and the Black Experience at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. This was in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, and we were musing about the role philanthropy could and should play in being collaborative partners with Black churches to generate social impact in underserved and under-resourced communities, working together to be a catalytic force for wellness, wellbeing, and flourishing.

We came across an extensive report published in 1990 by the Council on Foundations, edited by Rev. Dr. Alicia O. Byrd and called *Philanthropy and the Black Church*. The report shared that, back in 1981, the Council on Foundations had initiated a special Religious Philanthropy project. The Council’s president at that time, Ambassador James A. Joseph, believed that collaboration between religious organizations and philanthropic institutions was possible, particularly around research, joint funding, and implementation. This project led to the Council’s publication of *The Philanthropy of Organized Religion*

in 1984, where it became evident that the field would benefit greatly from a closer scrutiny of grantmaking relationships with Black churches. What emerged became the Philanthropy and Black Church Project, with a national office at the Council on Foundations and support from Lilly Endowment Inc., Ford Foundation, and other philanthropies.

So, this is not a new conversation. Yet, it is absolutely necessary to have the conversation again today. The pandemic shed light on the various other epidemics that plague underserved and under-resourced communities made up of Black and brown people. The senseless murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many others shined a bright light on the reality of historic racial inequity and injustice across our society.

In the field of philanthropy, that reckoning spurred key donors and foundations to think about how they can partner more intentionally with Black-led organizations—and more specifically with Black churches as anchor institutions in Black communities. Yet, what also became clear is that there is a wide gulf of knowledge, understanding, and partnership between philanthropic and Black church organizations today. There are funders who say they want to invest in Black churches as anchor institutions, but they do not know where to start.

Our sense is that pathways to trust-building began, again, in the imaginative, innovative, and possibility-posing conversations that took place during the Symposium of April 27-28, 2023. We attempt to capture key points from those conversations here, to provide a record and foundation for future work, and we conclude by noting some next steps toward a necessary collaborative between philanthropy and Black religious organizations.

## Looking Back: The Philanthropy and Black Church Project of the 20th Century

The 20th century Philanthropy and Black Church Project raised awareness about the need for collaboration. The 2023 Symposium opened by revisiting that effort and exploring the possibility of collaboration today. Speakers discussed how Black churches serve their communities, and why foundations may be reluctant to partner with them despite common concerns.

The Symposium began by looking back. Nearly fifty years ago, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, organized philanthropy entered into new relationships with Black churches. In the 1970s and '80s, Lilly Endowment Inc. and the Ford Foundation launched grantmaking programs to empower Black churches. Crucially, as part of these programs Lilly and Ford supported research and scholarship that powerfully documented the breadth and depth of Black church community service and exposed the basic truth that Black churches are themselves philanthropic organizations—indeed, they have long been the Black community's central, indigenous philanthropic institution.

Strengthened by this narrative shift and compelling data, the project gained momentum in the 1990s, as the Council on Foundations created its “national office” to support and encourage wider foundation engagement with Black religious organizations. The Council office



provided highly popular education programs at its annual meetings; published several large volumes of papers and proceedings (which is how we were able to learn about this history); cultivated strategic partnerships; encouraged collaboration; and raised funds to spread the work. In response, small and large foundations from Massachusetts to Florida, Michigan to Colorado, took up the call, launching innovative initiatives to encourage philanthropic investment in and by Black churches in America. All of this is beautifully described in a 2005 retrospective on the Philanthropy and the Black Church project, *Why the Black Church?*, written by Dr. Robert Franklin Jr. and published by the Southern Education Foundation.

As the term “retrospective” suggests, however, by 2005 the project was already past tense. Leadership changed and the funders’ priorities changed. In 1995, James Joseph



was appointed United States Ambassador to South Africa. In 1997, the Council closed its Office on Philanthropy and the Black Church. A few programs continued, but the sense of a common project disappeared, and with it any momentum. In her foreword to Franklin’s report, Southern Education Foundation President Lynn Huntley summarized the situation bluntly.

“Unfortunately, the project did not have either the resources or longevity to prompt a private philanthropic response commensurate with the power, potential and importance of Black churches as leadership and change agents for underserved communities. — Lynn Huntley

The Symposium of 2023 began by considering the 20th century project and asking whether such an effort is possible today. We were fortunate to be guided in this conversation by two veteran leaders who had been involved in that earlier chapter, starting with Robert Franklin himself, who is today the James T. and Berta R. Laney Professor in Moral Leadership at Emory University and President Emeritus of Morehouse College and the Interdenominational Theological Center.

In his opening remarks, Franklin observed that the 20th century project was predicated on two principles: *complementarity* (recognition of excellence on both sides) and *subsidiarity* (respect for local knowledge and for empowering people who have been systematically excluded from the benefits of American citizenship). Black churches, Franklin suggested, were recognized in that era as providing five forms of faith-based public presence, each of them crucial:

**Relief:** immediate direct relief of human misery

**Support:** mental health counseling and other forms of individual support

**Service:** social service delivery, professionalized services (i.e., job training, afterschool programming)

**Justice:** nonpartisan political activities (i.e., voter registration)

**Transformation:** comprehensive community development

The focus for a collaborative today, Franklin argued, should center on the need for moral leadership in American society. “How,” he asked, “can we support and form moral leadership for the common good?”

While acknowledging that contemporary congregations face new challenges, in terms of “skepticism, disaffiliation, and internal reckoning with contradictions,” Franklin concluded on a hopeful note.

“Black churches may still possess the record of service and resilience, agile and talented leadership, space, financial resources, armies of volunteers, capacities for building coalitions and partnerships, determination and grit to make an enormous impact on the human condition. — Robert Franklin

Mark Constantine, a longtime philanthropic leader who had participated in the 20th century project as well, offered a brief response to Dr. Franklin’s remarks. “In philanthropy, we always talk about racial equity, educational justice, and so forth,” Constantine observed. “And yet often while not in conversation with Black churches. Why is philanthropy not doing this?” He identified five philanthropic mindsets that might get in the way:

- 1 We think it’s not legal**  
(which is simply not true).
- 2 We struggle to imagine congregations as places of vitality.**
- 3 We worry about politization and where association with the church might lead.**
- 4 We have a sense that Black churches don’t collaborate with each other.**
- 5 We’re cautious about sharing power with people who have a power base of their own.**

Constantine also suggested several steps that philanthropy could take to move through these challenges, to build collaborative partnerships in the present day:



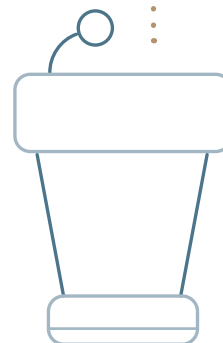
Map the data, just as the first movement did.

Invest strategically in capacity building for Black churches.



Connect Black churches with leaders across sectors.

Invest in lay and clergy leadership development strategies.



Support philanthropic leaders to speak on the importance of collaboration with the Black church, and to do so both with deep strategy and respect.



**A robust discussion followed these remarks, in which Franklin, Constantine, and audience members emphasized several additional themes:**

### **Focus on accountability.**

Church leaders can speak up and help to hold philanthropy accountable to its promises. In addition, community leaders should pay attention to where and how philanthropic funds are invested.

### **Think beyond traditional philanthropy ... and faith.**

Both philanthropy and faith are changing, and new, less institutional and less hierarchical forms are emerging. As a philanthropic advisor in the audience put it, “My clients are new to their wealth, they are disenfranchised in traditional philanthropy and the Black church. Where can they give that is as innovative and progressive as they demand? This group of outliers, they won’t wait.”

### **Above all, be in the room.**

Black people of faith need to be in the room where philanthropic decisions are made—and be ready to speak up with courage.



## This Moment: Opportunities and Challenges

The next set of sessions dug into opportunities and challenges for collaboration today. Speakers acknowledged that, while the Black church has been an anchor institution in communities for generations, it may need to think of itself as a different kind of anchor today. Likewise, organized philanthropy has its own history to reckon with so that there can be different power dynamics moving forward. These sessions named both the legacies of the Black church and organized philanthropy, as well as what is possible if they take a different approach.

“In the fragility of racial justice...the anchor might be a good metaphor to help us figure out how to navigate our current situation. — David Daniels III

### Opportunities

#### Black churches are still anchor institutions

Opening the second session of the Symposium, Debra Haggins, Founding Dean of the School of Religion, University Chaplain, and Executive Director & Treasurer of the Hampton University Ministers' Conference Choir Directors' & Organists' Guild Workshop at Hampton University, noted that the early Black church gathered in hush harbors and praise houses. Haggins emphasized how, from the start, hush harbors and praise houses were places for more than worship. People found formation, respect, and community in those spaces.

Haggins proposed that there is still a role and a mission for the Black church in contemporary society because people still look to the Black church for hope.



“The quest for meaning, hope, and dignity has been historically led by one of this country’s most powerful and distinctive religious organizations, the Black church. — Debra Haggins

The Black church isn’t the only anchor institution, however. According to Haggins, it is one among four anchor institutions in Black communities, alongside Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Black Greek Letter Organizations, and the Black family. For Haggins, the Black church is not only an anchor but “a load-bearing wall” that has helped to carry the weight and the pressure of the Black community.

Responding to Haggins, Raymond Pierce, President and CEO of the Southern Education Foundation, noted that partnerships between Black churches and philanthropists have a long history, dating back to the Underground Railroad, field schools, and more. Black churches have led the way in those partnerships, identifying the need, catalyzing participation, putting projects in motion — a model from which we can learn.

Pierce stated that any effort to respond to the challenges of the Black community today has to include the Black church. In response to the rhetorical question “How do we do this?” Pierce declared, echoing Haggins, “We work together.” But he also pressed the group to ask itself **why**:

### The question is today:

#### Collaboration for what purpose?

Joining the Symposium virtually, David Daniels III, the Henry Winters Luce Professor of World Christianity at McCormick Theological Seminary, agreed with both Haggins and Pierce that the Black church is an anchor institution. However, today, the Black church is “an anchor

in the sea for a scattered church.” Members live in different zip codes, not just one neighborhood, as was the case in many communities in the past.

#### Daniels asked the following additional questions:

**How does the Black church assess and monitor the impact of the billions-plus that was committed to racial justice after the murder of George Floyd?**

**What matrixes or rubrics do we advocate be used to determine the effectiveness of these initiatives?**

**Can the Black church participate in setting racial justice goals that our society might establish for 2030 or 2040?**

The Black church has been and is an anchor institution ready to engage for this moment—but, as Daniels suggested, we may need to understand the image of the anchor differently. If the church is an anchor at sea, does that change its mission? How can it at once move with its people and, in Haggins’ words, still provide formation and community and respect?

In the discussion that followed, attendees emphasized that these questions are especially important when considering younger people. Black churches must be spaces where younger people, digital natives, can be heard, mentored, and encouraged to speak into the life of the church. When the Black church focuses on equity, young people may not be the only people drawn to the mission of the Black church. At its best, the Black church can draw people together.

## Philanthropy is newly primed to engage

“I hope you will be looking in your communities for philanthropy that is reclaiming love and thinking about repair.”  
— Stephanie Boddie

In this moment, philanthropy is also primed to engage with Black churches, for three distinct reasons.

First, like so many other sectors of our society, contemporary philanthropy has been engaged in a period of racial reckoning since the spring of 2020, a reckoning which has brought new philanthropic focus to funding for racial equity and to funding of Black-led organizations. This new philanthropic focus has also built upon studies conducted over the past decade which revealed significant disparities in philanthropic funding along racial lines.

Second, and simultaneously, there has been new interest in building relationships between philanthropy and faith-based organizations. A 2021 Bridgespan Group report, [Elevating the Role of Faith-Inspired Impact in the Social Sector](#), helped direct attention to a “religion gap” in philanthropic funding. The Aspen Institute has added to the momentum through its initiative on faith and philanthropy and publications like [But What If They Preach?](#) Foundations have pooled funds to experiment in faith-sector funding focused on shared goals like civility, democracy, and prophetic imagination.

Third, over a longer period of years, there has been a growing movement around Black philanthropy which has focused both on recognizing the long history of Black giving and encouraging and organizing Black philanthropy in the present day. Anchoring the third session, Symposium speaker Valaida Fullwood shared

this movement with us through her own story of starting a Black giving circle, writing a book about Black philanthropy, and creating a multimedia touring museum exhibit, [Giving Back: The Soul of Philanthropy Reframed and Exhibited](#), that has been presented in more than 35 communities. Fullwood described the movement as reaching both forward and back.

“Growing segments of Black communities are rejecting conventional ideas, ineffective strategies and toxic practices associated with philanthropy. Many of us are charting new paths by engaging in practices that reflect values, traditions and social necessities, which have been instrumental to Black life in America...and beyond...”  
— Valaida Fullwood

Responding to Fullwood, Stephanie Boddie, Associate Professor of Church and Community Ministries at Baylor University, emphasized that philanthropy in the Black church experience is about a love that is expansive and transformative, a love that drives justice, and a love that strives to make earth more like heaven.

“Building a necessary collaborative between philanthropy and the Black church begins with the shared vision and purpose of love for humanity.”  
— Stephanie Boddie

In his own response, Tim Russell, Vice President of Community Engagement and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at WTTW in Chicago, IL, noted that many foundations began to see the value of Black churches because of the social justice movement and the church’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Together, Fullwood, Boddie and Russell showed how these three philanthropic movements—of racial reckoning, relationship-building with faith-based organizations, and Black giving—are active in this moment, creating a remarkable opportunity for new engagement between philanthropy and Black congregations. At the same time, they and others in the audience noted that these movements could be much more actively interconnected—which brings us to the challenges of this moment

## Challenges

One of the key challenges facing Black churches is their lack of connections with philanthropic institutions. In our fourth session, Jeanné Lewis, CEO of Faith in Public Life, explored this problem of missed connections, drawing on her own experience as a Black Catholic and a philanthropic leader.

Cultivating and sustaining relationships is an important part of both Black church and philanthropic culture. Yet annual gatherings for philanthropic leaders, where so many relationships are solidified, rarely include leaders from the Black church. As Lewis noted, key features of institutional philanthropy—most notably, a reliance on relationships, wariness of religion, and aversion to risk—means less philanthropic investment in the Black church. That lack of investment can be overcome by a power shift. The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy’s guide, [PowerMoves](#), may be a useful resource here; it can help foundations assess their internal power dynamics, including those related to program officers and their leadership.

As Lewis noted, leaders in the Black church also have power of their own, which they can use to navigate between their own institutions and institutional philanthropy.

“The Black Church throughout its history has been visionary, bold, on the frontline for justice, innovative in its social problem solving, and a consistent presence when all other friends and allies have abandoned Black communities. How can the Black church wield its power to engage philanthropy? — Jeanné Lewis

In response to Lewis’s remarks, Mae Hong, Vice President of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, noted that philanthropy has been complicit in creating many injustices funders now seek to address. And she warned that, even when it does step up, philanthropy can be guilty of “movement capture,” as illustrated by key moments from the civil rights movement. Hong encouraged Black churches to “focus on the few, not the many, as even one foundation’s involvement can signal a seal of approval for others.” She also stressed that Black churches should strive to set their own terms in the relationship.

Adding to the conversation, George Thorn, Senior Vice President and Senior Philanthropic Client Manager of Bank of America Private Bank, encouraged attendees to expand the way they think about philanthropy to include individual philanthropists, estate planning attorneys, and bank trustees who manage funds. Thorn went on to make a series of recommendations for Black churches as they work to enter into relationships with philanthropic institutions: know who in your church has expertise in what areas; find things that the church is already doing that align with philanthropic interests; and invite philanthropic leaders into your spaces to foster collaboration.

The conversation concluded by emphasizing that the future is bright for philanthropy and the Black church – and that the kind of encounters made possible by the Symposium can help leaders move forward.

# Moving Forward:

## Building the Necessary Collaborative

“Philanthropy is commendable, but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice which make philanthropy necessary.”  
—Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In our final session, Devin Murphy, Partner at The Bridgespan Group, presented the core findings of the 2021 Bridgespan research with an emphasis on the unique challenges facing Black churches in accessing funding from large institutional funders. In particular, he highlighted:

**Limited ability of funders to understand the full landscape of actors** (e.g., no system-wide sources of data tracking like Candid/Guidestar and non-transparent financial reporting since churches are not required to report on the equivalent of 990 tax forms).

**Church financials are often below the standard thresholds for funders** (e.g., having less than \$500k in annual revenue for major foundations).

**For progressive funders, there is a perceived association of Black churches with religious traditionalists and conservatives** who have taken positions at odds with strategies linked to social change and social justice.

**Concerns with declining relevance for community** given across the board declines in religious affiliation and religious service attendance.

**In response to these challenges, he suggested potential solutions that would help bridge the gap:**

**Support the build out of quantitative research** that regularly captures key data needed to inform philanthropic investment strategies.

**Work in partnership with trusted intermediaries** (e.g., Oikos Institute) who can aggregate demand and raise resources on behalf of multiple Black churches.

**Elevate new leaders, ideas, and approaches** that demonstrate how Black churches are aligned to social justice causes.

**Explore new program models** that go beyond the brick-and-mortar frame of the church to meet people where they are in community.

Murphy also proposed specific areas of consideration to live into the frame of a ‘necessary collaborative’ between philanthropy and the Black church. Following his presentation, small group discussions generated many thoughtful responses related to the five areas identified.

## Establish a Research Agenda

One small group discussed what research questions (and answers) would be most capable of making the progressive, prophetic work of Black churches legible for philanthropy, as well as who would need to be involved in shaping the research agenda and what anchor institutions could take a leadership role. The group decided that there would need to be landscape analyses of the issues that churches are working on, and mappings of the work that Black churches are doing. With funding, the churches could do the actual research, particularly if they had multiple years to do so.

## Leadership Development

Another small group discussed how the structure, role, and programmatic focus of seminaries might be reimaged to attract and develop the next generation of social justice leaders. The group agreed that curricular innovation is needed to prepare seminarians and non-degree-seeking church leaders to prepare for realities of leadership that they're not otherwise exposed to (needing more robust preparation than just a church administration class), including philanthropic engagement for social impact.

## Network Infrastructure

This small group focused on network infrastructure needed to radically accelerate the use of Black church assets – financial, social, intellectual, and human – in

service of community needs. Participants concluded that there is a need for capacity-building support to develop infrastructure internally and in the community, and that Black church work needs to be documented and branded in ways that philanthropy knows of or recognizes.

## New Models of the Black Church

Another small group imagined examples of new ways of congregating (e.g., ministry of the streets, opportunities to leverage technology and storytelling in different ways) that would point to the future of the Black church. The group also spoke about the need for more LGBTQ-affirming persons to help the church embrace a more inclusive understanding of what it means to be the church, a people gathered and not a monument.

## Point of Arrival

Finally, a small group was asked to envision the year 2030 as a time when philanthropy had increased its share of funding for Black churches by tenfold in service of a shared social justice and equity agenda. What would it look like and what is needed to get us there? This group talked about how the Black church could scale faster, develop a large-scale initiative around economic mobility, and honor parts of the legacy of the Black church while also making faithful steps to move forward.

# In Conclusion

Throughout the Symposium, speakers and attendees committed their time, energy and attention to a multifaceted conversation about two institutions that have the potential to be powerful together for the transformation of communities. And there is more to talk about, and more to do together, as we seek to continue the good work begun by the Philanthropy and the Black Church project decades ago.

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another...” – John 13:34

Stephanie Boddie and Devin Murphy reminded us that the root meaning of philanthropy is “love of humanity.” Here are three steps that Symposium participants identified to bring philanthropy and the Black church together on the ground of *shared love of humanity* and began to build partnerships that make a difference for communities.



## Seek opportunities for mutual introduction.

The Symposium clearly highlighted a wide gulf of knowledge and understanding between philanthropic and Black church organizations. It was evident in the various questions and conversations that philanthropy and the Black church don't know each other's culture. Building a necessary collaborative will necessitate learning about one another, gaining cultural competency, and discovering mutual mission alignment.

## Look again.

Philanthropic organizations can shift their mindset and perception to see Black churches who have served their communities for a significant period of time as anchor institutions, similar to hospitals, schools and community organizations like United Way. It is an opportunity for Black churches to fully claim this identity as well, and fully embrace the transformative value they provide to the community they serve.

## Invest in people, not just programs.

Institutional philanthropic leaders must recognize that inexperience in grant administration does not equal incompetence. There is an opportunity for philanthropy to consider ways to invest in the capacity building and leadership development of congregational leaders that would enable them to better scale the transformative impact many are striving to make in the communities they serve.



## Resources for Further Reading

[Why the Black Church? The Case for Partnership Between Black Churches & Organized Philanthropy](#)

– Southern Education Foundation

[The Soul of Philanthropy](#)

– The Chicago Cultural Center

[Strengthening Black Churches:](#)

[A Collaborative Approach](#)

– The Hyams Foundation

[Elevating the Role of Faith-Inspired Impact in the Social Sector](#) – The Bridgespan Group

[But What if They Preach: A Guide for Funding Faith-Inspired Grantees with Boundaries and Integrity](#) – Aspen Institute

[The Purpose Path](#) – Nicholas Pearce

To support these first steps forward, the Center for the Church and the Black Experience at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary and Lake Institute on Faith & Giving at the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy have committed to developing needed resources and opportunities for “mutual introduction” between organized philanthropy and Black churches. We will also make the Symposium a regular event, to move the conversation forward nationally.

So much of what was articulated in the original Philanthropy and the Black Church project all those years ago was about the need for the Black church and organized philanthropy to collaborate. That need is just as real today, if not more so, because both philanthropic

organizations and Black religious organizations are publicly committing to promoting equity, making profound changes in their own operations and approaches, and acknowledging how important it is to build partnerships for the positive transformation of communities.

The hope of the partnership between Garrett and Lake, a continuation of a project that came well before the 2023 Symposium, is to encourage and equip the collaborators, and in doing so, encourage and equip entire communities for the greater good.

This is truly a collaborative that we believe is necessary.

# Contributors

The 2023 Symposium on Philanthropy and the Black Church would not have been possible without the valuable contributions of so many individuals. A special thanks to the persons listed below, as well as all of the attendees who were present for this important conversation.

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