

# **Missing the Beat: Adult Learning Through Religious Music in an African American Church**

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**Abstract: The purpose of this study was to understand the ways religious music contributes to learning and meaning making for African American adults within American society. Retrospective biographies were used to understand how the religious musical experiences of African American adults affect learning. The findings of the study are discussed.**

## **Introduction**

From the days of religious gatherings on hilltops, cotton fields, and barns to revivals in open fields or abandoned store fronts to the worship services in modern stately structures, the African American church has always been a place of worship and a place of teaching and learning. The strong oral tradition and use of oral teaching in the African American community secures music an important resource for teaching and learning in the African American community and church. Stansfield (1994) states, "It is possible to use data from oral traditions to track the quality of life experiences of those living in poor white or Afro-American communities. Testimony in Afro-American churches that serve the inner-city poor can be valuable sources of data about health care, labor market activities and child rearing" (p.185). The African American church presents a unique research opportunity for those seeking insight into the religious, psychosocial, educational, and political culture of African Americans.

## **Review of the literature**

Mainstream adult education literature reveals little information on learning activities of African Americans (Briscoe & Ross, 1991; Ross-Gordon, 1991), particularly those sponsored by the African American church. Flannery (1995) contends adult learning theories must be mindful of the influence of social, historical, and economic roles in adult education. She states, "adult learning theories must acknowledge that people and cultures vary in how they learn" (p.156). She (1995) further stresses the need for adult learning theories to "become inclusive and give voice to all people and groups, allowing missing voices (women, working-class person, persons of color) to narrate their diverse stories of how and where they learn, and about their values of learning" (p.156).

Colin, III (1994) calls for an approach to education based on African American development and culture. This study is important for several reasons: (a) examining the impact of religious music on learning experiences of African American adults; (b) expanding Gardner's research on musical intelligence, and assisting adult educators to understand "musical ways of knowing"; (c) providing insight into alternative approaches and sources to teaching and learning via the humanities; and (d) exploring the use of religious music to empower individuals and groups for

social change, and (e) contributing another perspective on the learning and educational needs and experiences of African American adult learners. The findings contribute to the field of adult education research by focusing on the African American experience.

Some writers in adult education have focused their attention on music and its impact on adults. The literature of adult education notes particularly (a) how important music is in the lives of adults and (b) the impact of music on human developments and civilization. Yet, despite the importance of music in the lives of adults, very little research has been conducted linking music and adult learning.

Zanzig (1936) raised the issue of the importance of music in society. He emphasized that "Music tends, even without the aid of teachers or courses, to be profoundly educative. It seems to reach directly to those innermost layers of our natures which the purely intellectual subjects are likely to leave untouched, and yet which are the very basis of what we are and of what we shall become" (p.365-366).

Van de Wall (1938) seemed to concur with Zanzig and particularly held adult educators responsible for not including music as part of the curriculum in education. Van de Wall (1938) wrote:

There is in education circles today some confusion as to the significance and place of music in Adult Education. It is also attributable to the fact that music specialists and teachers have not escaped the isolation which seems to be the penalty for specialization; neither have all of them yet learned to exchange ideas and to work amicably side by side with educators in different fields and with other protagonists of community culture (p.V).

While music has received some attention in the literature of adult education, more attention has been given to the role of music in social and political movements. From the early days of Jane Addams, founder of the Hull House in 1886, the Traveling Chautauquas, to Myles Horton and the Highlander folk school, music has and continues to reflect the hopes, dreams and struggles and learning in the lives of many adults. Myles Horton and his wife Zilphia included music and the arts as an integral part of the mission and curriculum of the Highlander Folk School. Horton (1973) stated,

Today, as in the past, Highlander is pioneering music workshops, community musical activities, and on occasion - the rediscovery of the musical heritage often buried in the Appalachian hollows Ballads, hymns, folk songs, and songs of protest all these have done much to arouse people to awareness and to the sense of community. (pp. 329-330)

According to Gardner (1983) "of all the gifts with which individuals may be endowed, none emerges earlier than musical talent" (p. 99). Gardner contends those persons whose dominant intelligence is musical learn best through activities that engage them through rhythm and melody. Gardner also notes the link between musical intelligence to the personal intelligences (interpersonal and intrapersonal) because each intelligence deals with feelings and communication of those feelings. There are at least seven different types of intelligences, which include, (a) linguistic, (b) logical-mathematical, (c) spatial, (d) bodily kinesthetic, (e) intrapersonal and (f) interpersonal and (g) musical intelligence.

Bell (1996) views religious music as an important resource for African Americans in their survival and struggles with the pressures of society. He understands the power of this music to effect change in the lives of African

Americans. He writes, "Embracing religion that was undergirded by this music helped slaves to be free in their own minds" (p.1). He further notes, "There must be a connection between this music and how we utilized it in earlier ordeals and its potential for now. But how do I find the connection and - assuming I can convince others of my discovery?" (p. 11).

The **purpose** of this dissertation study was to understand the ways in which religious music contributes to the nature and extent of learning and meaning making of African American adults within American society. The study explored the question, is religious music educative in the African American church?

**Methodology.** This descriptive research study used retrospective biographies to inductively understand how the religious musical experiences of African American adults affect learning. Descriptive and interpretive methodology was chosen for several reasons, first, for its ability to allow the participants to express themselves freely and openly, in their own words. Second, the descriptive and interpretive approach permitted me to more deeply examine and understand the participant's experiences with religious music and learning in the African American church. Third, because there is very little information about ways in which religious music is educative for African American adults, qualitative methodology allowed me to more thoroughly explore this process. The study was designed to gather information from various individuals within an African American church, including clergy, musicians, choir members and non-choir members.

**Data Collection.** Over forty interviews were conducted with African American adults (choir members, members of the congregation, pastor, ministers, Christian education leaders, and a group of "subject matter experts" in the area of religious music). The church members (all from the same congregation) were asked to reflect, interact, discuss and respond to questions about their musical experiences and learning. The subject matter experts were not members of the church but were selected based on their knowledge and experience with African American religious music. The study also included document analysis and field observation as part of data collection.

Van Manen (1990) states, "theme analysis refers then to the process of recovering the theme or themes that are embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery of the work" (p.78). Several themes emerged from the data, which became a tool to understand the educative value of religious music for African American adults. The major themes that emerged were: (a) adult's musical background and influences, (b) theology, (c) "bad theology", (d) music as a pedagogical tool, (e) sense of unity, (f) choir participation, (g) softening the heart, (h) religious music and learning, and (i) learning.

Musical background included the childhood experiences of the participants. The majority of the participants had some early musical experience either having studied music privately or exposed to musical training in school or college that helped shape their present attitudes toward music. Another factor shaping the musical background of the participants were the importance of family members, friends and the church in the development of musical tastes and preferences. For many participants religious music was a shared family activity that united and bonded the family ties of the participants. Most importantly the participants noted their early musical beginnings helped shaped their theological foundation by introducing Christian themes and ideas.

All of the participants indicated they learned theology from religious music. For many, the music contained more of the theological messages than the sermon. Participants discussed three types of theology found in religious music; the theology of their ancestors, theology which conveyed events and stories found in the Bible; and theology rooted in faith, beliefs and convictions.

The subject matter experts believed African American adults often learned "bad theology" from the lyrics of some religious music. These experts noted the lack of critical analysis of music lyrics by church participants. However, the church participants were more concerned with the genres of religious music having a negative impact on the worship experience and more importantly whether the lyrics contained the words "God" or "Jesus". For the church participants, if these words appeared in the lyrics, then the songs was considered theologically sound.

All of the participants viewed religious music as an important teaching tool in the church. Participants noted music was able to reach and teach a variety of learners who may be at different stages in the religious and spiritual growth.

The pastor of the church stated, "When you learn a song, you also give yourself in a way to it. And I think when we truly learn it, transformation takes place, that learning process. We sing it because we believe it."

Religious music was viewed as a way to increase the sense of unity among the congregation. Many believed the music shaped the identity of the church and they perceived themselves in relation to other religious communities of African American churches.

Participants indicated their participation in a musical organization within the church was a learning experience. They spoke of learning to work together, learning musical skills, interpersonal skills and developing social skills from their involvement in the choir. Religious music was seen as educative by the participants when it used as an aid to guide, instruct, and cope during difficult and oppressive times. Participants spoke of learning from the emotions and experiences of each other through the music. This was spoken of as "softening the muscles of your heart" by one participant.

The participants thought religious music and learning was interconnected. Participants spoke of learning in the church as: (a) subconscious mind never sleeps, (b) incidental learning where the music provides the opportunity to learn social skills, business skills and communication skills, and (c) learning cannot be isolated from life. Learning could in the church in a variety of ways, through people, informal opportunities, formal studies and through religious music being incorporated into every area of the church.

Findings. African American adults in this study perceived religious music as educative in two ways. First, as a source to transmit basic Biblical beliefs and theological statements that served to reinforce what was heard in the teachings, scriptures, and sermon in the church. Second, it was further educative simply as an appreciation of music as a cultural art form in the church. The Biblical beliefs and theology heard in the music influenced the thinking and affected the views of the participants toward life, God, religion, and racial issues. As one participant noted, "we sing it because we believe it" was true for many of the participants in this study.

However, what is learned individually and collectively or how extensive the learning that occurred from religious music varied greatly among the participants and requires further study.

Summary and Discussion. The purpose of this study was to explore the question: Is religious music educative in the African American church? Although each participant thought of religious music as educative what many described and agreed upon was that religious music is inspirational. Religious music was an important tool to transmit basic biblical beliefs and scriptures which served to reinforce what was heard in the teachings, scriptures and sermons of the church. For many participants, religious music was educative as simply by its art form and the appreciation of the cultural form it expressed in the African American church. The participants were taught important concepts of endurance, liberation, and unity through religious music. These concepts affected their views toward life, God, religious, racial issues and views of themselves.

Although religious music was seen as educative when it aroused emotions, there was no recognition of music as a control mechanism that might manipulate the emotions of the church. In addition, there was a notable lack of concern for social action expressed by the participants which was an important cultural messages of early African American religious music.

Spirituality, religion, and religious music are not isolated from learning nor are they any longer strictly within confined to the church. Goldberger (1996) noted the profound influence of religion and the Black church in the lives of African American women in her work Women's Ways of Knowing.

Adult education programs that focus on understanding adult development and transformative learning could benefit from understanding the way religious music affects various cultures, ethnic groups and to identify the influence of religious music on basic beliefs and worldviews of their adult students. Exploring personal beliefs through religious music would enable learners to become engaged with music in a way that could provide an opportunity to learn from one another. The potential for using religious music to expand critical thinking of basic beliefs and assumptions could foster new ways of thinking and viewing the world for adult learners. Because religious music has played such

an important role in the African American church and community, it presents an opportunity to discuss issues related to race and gender in religious music. For instance, how does religious music promote or discourage sexism or racism?

Religious music has always been an integral role in the history and culture of African Americans and yet there is little research that explores the educative value or its affects on African American adults.

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