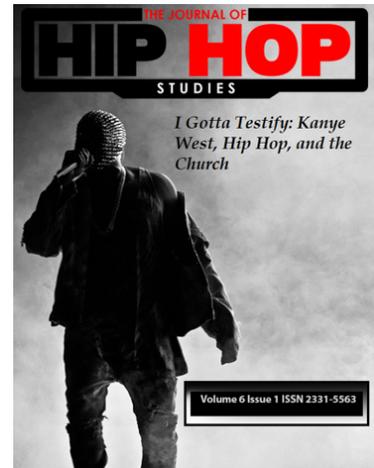


## For Colored Girls and Boys Who Have Considered Suicide/ When Prayer and GOOD Music Weren't Enough

Joshua K. Wright

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*Joshua K. Wright*

### **Abstract**

Lauren Chanel Allen, a 22-year-old Christian graduate student at Howard University, struggled with mental illness for years. Like so many blacks, Lauren expected her faith to serve an elixir for her problems, including depression. However, her prayers were not sufficient. When she was unable to find solace in the church, she sought out an alternative source: the music of Kanye West. She shared her story in a 2016 article, "How An Ultralight Beam Helped My Dark Depression," which she published in *Abernathy* magazine. Lauren's story speaks to the disconnect that many millennials have with the church. Nowhere in her article did she use the word - therapy - or mention seeking professional help for her condition. Lauren's avoidance of medical specialists speaks to broader issues in the African American community related to mental illness.

This article addresses the following questions: Why do some blacks place more faith in their churches than professional therapy to address their mental health concerns? How does the church's inability to properly address mental illness contribute to the fact that some black millennials find more solace in Hip Hop than in the church when they experience suffering? What do black pastors think about millennials turning to Hip Hop and rappers like Kanye West for comfort instead of the church? How much reliance should black millennials who are struggling with their mental health place in their faith in Hip Hop musicians such as Kanye West that uplift their spirits?

Lauren Chanel Allen was a doctoral student studying Social Psychology at Howard University as tensions began to rise in Ferguson, Missouri, following the death of Michael Brown. Brown's death and other tragic losses in her life caused Lauren to experience renewed bouts of depression and suicidal thoughts. Lauren had grown up in the church and could always find solace in her faith. She wore T-shirts proclaiming "Jesus Is My Homeboy" throughout high school and joined a Christian student organization in college. However, as the dark clouds formed around her, the 22-year-old graduate student no longer felt the same support from the church. She shared her story in a 2016 article, "How An Ultralight Beam Helped My Dark Depression," which she published in *Abernathy* magazine. Lauren recalled,

I worried I lost my faith over the past years. I would pray and for the first time in life, I felt as though I was talking to the ceiling... One suicidal period and a hospital stay later, Ferguson happened.... Just when I got the strength to take back my life, cops were taking Black lives... So yeah. I lost my faith...<sup>1</sup>

Lauren says that amid her storm, it was not prayer or a pastor's words that gave her the strength needed to heal her troubled mind. On the contrary, it was Hip Hop that saved her life. It was the music of Kanye West and the performance of his gospel-infused song "Ultralight Beam" on *Saturday Night Live* that saved the day. She explained:

When times get hard, we defer to our faith. Or we used to... More and more millennials lack a belief in a higher power because we're stifled when we enter the sanctuary... We're told to become completely different. To hide our true selves. Don't curse. Don't party. Don't wear that. Even how we praise is under scrutiny. But this "Ultralight Beam" performance had Negroes dabbing in the choir, leaning and snapping, milly rocking on the *SNL* block, and unapologetically so... This is a God dream. This is everything.<sup>2</sup>

Lauren's article intrigued me for several reasons. In 2015, my pastor tasked me with overseeing a new Young Adult Ministry for individuals between the ages of 18 and 40. One of my initial tasks was to explore why millennials felt disconnected from the church so that the church could find ways to reach them. Like so many blacks, Lauren expected her faith to serve as an elixir for her problems, including depression. However, her prayers were not sufficient. When she was unable to find solace in the church, she sought out an alternative source: the music of Kanye West. Perhaps she felt that the church elders would have been too judgmental of her condition since they were already judging her on far less critical matters. Or maybe their prayers rang hollow in her ears. Lauren's article speaks to that disconnect some millennials are facing. What I also found interesting was her commentary on mental illness. Nowhere in her article did she use the word—therapy—or mention seeking professional help for her condition. Lauren's

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<sup>1</sup> Lauren Chanel Allen, "How an Ultralight Beam Helped My Dark Depression," *Abernathy*, May 13, 2015, accessed November 20, 2016, <https://abernathymagazine.com/ultralight-beam-helped-dark-depression/>.

<sup>2</sup> Allen, "How an Ultralight Beam Helped My Dark Depression."

avoidance of medical specialists, at the time, speaks to broader issues in the African American community related to mental illness.

This article addresses the following questions: Why do some blacks place more faith in their churches than professional therapy to address their mental health concerns? How does the church's inability to properly treat mental illness contribute to the fact that some black millennials find more solace in Hip Hop than in the church when they experience suffering? What do black pastors think about millennials turning to Hip Hop and rappers like Kanye West for comfort instead of the church? How much reliance should black millennials who are struggling with their mental health place in their faith or in Hip Hop musicians that uplift their spirits?

### A Cure for Wellness: Diagnosing Black Mental Health

King Davis, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin, has been conducting groundbreaking research projects on the history of mental illness in the African-American community for years.<sup>3</sup> According to Davis, the common belief in colonial-era medical schools was that only wealthy whites experienced mental illness due to their stressful lifestyles. On June 7, 1870, the Central Lunatic Asylum was opened in Virginia to treat blacks labeled mentally insane. A similar hospital was opened in Crownsville, Maryland, in 1911. The black patients in Crownsville were forced to participate in "industrial therapy," which meant working in the tobacco fields, basket weaving, and other forms of agricultural labor. They were also given "hydrotherapy," a practice of placing patients in ice-cold tubs. It was believed that this treatment was not only therapeutic, but also helped to uplift the race.<sup>4</sup>

Racist attitudes often tainted the diagnoses of black patients in the 19th and early 20th century. In addition to manic episodes and depression, blacks could be committed to mental asylums for religious excitement, unhappy marriages, idiocy, masturbation, talking back to white superiors, criminal deviance, and *freedom*.<sup>5</sup> Physician Samuel A. Cartwright coined the Greek-derived phrase "Drapetomania," in 1851, to refer to a mental illness that caused slaves to run away from their plantations or seek freedom.<sup>6</sup> In his book *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (2012), Jim Downs documents the number of diagnosed cases of newly

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<sup>3</sup> In his 2016 paper, "Central Lunatic Asylum for Colored Insane 1865-1900: The First 50,000 Admissions," King Davis presents an overview of the earliest recorded cases of blacks with mental illness.

<sup>4</sup> Ayah Nuriddin, a doctoral student at Johns Hopkins University, presented the following paper at the 100th annual meeting of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History: "'Something Needed to be Done for the Black Patients': Integrating the Crownsville State Hospital, 1945-1970."

<sup>5</sup> King Davis was a panelist in a session on African Americans and Mental Health Issues at the annual meeting of ASALH in Richmond, VA on October 6, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Kevin White, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Health and Mental Illness* (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE, 2002), 41-42.

freed blacks who experienced a host of sicknesses.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, black families and individuals developed a distrust of psychiatrists causing mental health to become a stigmatized topic in African-American households and institutions.

Today, even though mental health assistance is more readily available, research indicates that many blacks still feel uncomfortable with the idea of therapy. Keli Goff reports that many black men and women do not seek professional medical attention due to a stigma, lack of insurance, a distrust of doctors, and the belief that blacks are naturally better equipped to handle emotional pain because our ancestors endured slavery and Jim Crow. On the FOX series *Empire* (2015 -) the eldest son of the fictional Lyon family, Andre (Trai Byers), is suffering from bipolar disorder. His mother Cookie (Taraji P. Henson) derides mental illness as a white person's disease. In his 2016 action-comedy film *Central Intelligence* comedian Kevin Hart says black families do not seek professional treatment, they simply go to the barbershop. *Psychology Today* notes that black men are less likely to seek treatment than black women and white men.<sup>8</sup> Some use drugs to help them cope. "Niggas ain't Molly Percocets cuz it's all good. ... that's why we see people overdosing on the lean, Xanax and heroin because they're self-medicating," says Vic Mensa.<sup>9</sup> "A lot of people are going through trauma and are too embarrassed to get help," adds Jay-Z.<sup>10</sup>

### **Mental Illness and the Souls of Black Folk: Prayer v. Therapy**

A large number of black Christians believe that prayer is all they need to cure their mental ailments. King Davis tells a story of a black pastor in Texas who was encouraging his members to bring all their prescription drugs to the front of the church and give them over to the Lord.<sup>11</sup> I spoke with Rev. Danielle Graham on January 20, 2017, when she was an associate minister in her thirties at Metropolitan Baptist Church in Largo, Maryland. After a suicide attempt, while in seminary, she went to her pastor in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for counseling. She was saddened by the lack of support and understanding from church leaders whose best advice was: "Pray about it." Her family and other church members gave her advice that echoed the pastor's sentiments. There are two popular scriptures in the New Testament section of the Bible that are often used to address mental illness:

Psalm 34:17-20 "When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their

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<sup>7</sup> Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Keli Goff, "Do Whites Have a Mental-Health Edge?" *The Root* May 8, 2013. Accessed June 23, 2016, [http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2013/05/mental\\_health\\_illness\\_in\\_blacks\\_failure\\_to\\_seek\\_treatment\\_may\\_be\\_holding\\_us\\_back.3.html](http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2013/05/mental_health_illness_in_blacks_failure_to_seek_treatment_may_be_holding_us_back.3.html).

<sup>9</sup> Vic Mensa was interviewed on *The Breakfast Club* Power 105.1 FM on July 31, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Jay-Z was interviewed on *Rap Radar* on August 18, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> King Davis and Albert Thompkins, "Mental Health Education in African American Divinity/Theology Schools," September 2012 policy report for The Institute for Urban Policy Research & Analysis.

troubles.”

Philippians 4:6-7 “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.”

Rev. Graham soon realized that prayer and the church were not enough to solve her problems. She needed self-care, which included consulting with professional clinicians. She believes that most black churches lack staff members trained to handle mental health issues properly. “You would not tell someone with diabetes or cancer to just pray it away,” says Graham.<sup>12</sup> This problem, as she sees it, was depicted in season one of *Empire*. The character Andre Lyon stops taking his medication, thereby exacerbating his condition, after he gets baptized and begins regular prayer consultations with his pastor. According to Rev. Graham:

Mental health is different for everyone. You have to find out what medication, and what dosage, works best for you so that you are not a zombie or [risk] becoming addicted. The medication doesn’t get rid of the disorder. It helps curb the intensity of it and keeps you from getting too low. A psychologist is going to help you function using the lowest dosage of medication as you continue to seek therapy to learn the proper coping skills.<sup>13</sup>

Rev. Graham has made mental health awareness an essential component of her ministry. She started an online group for open dialogue about mental health and moral support in 2013. For a while, she served as the ministry leader for Metropolitan’s IAMA Counseling Ministry (IAMA), which is committed to the emotional and spiritual health of all people. The ministry provides Christian-based counseling and prayer support to members of Metropolitan and the general public. Professional clinicians and trained paraprofessionals staff the IAMA, and the IAMA team is on-call during worship services to address any mental health or emotional issues that arise. IAMA also sponsors community-based workshops and forums throughout the year on a variety of topics, including grief, loss, stress, and depression.

Metropolitan is among a small number of black churches in Maryland to offer professional mental health assistance. Reid Temple African Methodist Episcopal Church in Glenn Dale, Maryland, provides mental health support from licensed counselors to congregants and residents in the community.<sup>14</sup> The Renaissance Center of Morning Star Baptist Church in Woodlawn, Maryland, offers similar resources to members and residents in the surrounding Baltimore neighborhoods.<sup>15</sup>

The *American Journal of Public Health* published the article “Alternative Mental Health Services: The Role of the Black Church in the South.” The findings in this article

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<sup>12</sup> Rev. Danielle Graham was interviewed on January 7, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Rev. Danielle Graham was interviewed on May 1, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> “Restoration Center Incorporated,” [https://reidrestoration.com/?page\\_id=73](https://reidrestoration.com/?page_id=73).

<sup>15</sup> “The Renaissance Center,” <http://www.therenaissancecenter.org/about-us/our-staff>.

revealed that the pastor in the black church often serves as a proxy for professional mental health advisers.<sup>16</sup> Kimberly D. Farris examined how black pastors conceptualized mental illness in her dissertation “Innovative Ways to Address Mental Health Needs of African-Americans.” Farris’s findings revealed that black pastors were among the most influential and easily recognizable leaders and support systems for African American families. Nevertheless, her data also showed that there was a lack of collaboration between most black clergy and professional mental health providers.<sup>17</sup>

Dr. Sherrill McMillan, Minister of Counseling and Family Services at Metropolitan Baptist Church, was a co-founder of IAMA in the 1990s. Dr. McMillan, who received her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from California Coast University, shared the following sentiments with me:

For the most part divinity schools do not offer this type of study. You may get a couple of basic counseling courses, which is not nearly sufficient to address mental health. Most pastors do not understand the treatment and are not able to properly assess or diagnose the problems. I have had numerous people come to my office for counseling because they could not find the help they needed from their pastors. There is a fear of mental health in the black community, which dates back to misinterpretations of Freud and the notion of people messing with your head.<sup>18</sup>

Mental health in most of the divinity/theology schools is secondary to their more direct mission of education for the traditional or circumscribed pastorate. In 2012 The Institute for Urban Policy Research & Analysis at the University of Texas at Austin released a report that evaluated the effectiveness of four black divinity schools in equipping their students to deal with mental health appropriately. The schools were (1) The Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta, Georgia; (2) The Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology of Virginia Union University in Richmond, Virginia; (3) Howard University School of Divinity in Washington, DC; and (4) American Baptist College in Nashville, Tennessee. The assessment was conducted using a qualitative, explorative design which involved interviewing university deans, program directors, and professors at each school of divinity.

At the time this policy report was published Interdenominational Theological Center offered courses entitled “The Psychology of Pastoral Care,” “Clinical Introduction to the Psychology of Pastoral Care,” and “Introduction to Pastoral Counseling and Psychotherapy.” However, the school did not offer any collaborative programs with the nearby medical school at Morehouse College. The Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of

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<sup>16</sup> Michael B. Blank, Marcus Mahmood, Jeanne C. Fox, and Thomas Guterbock, “Alternative Mental Health Services: The Role of the Black Church in the South,” *American Journal of Public Health*, 92 (2002): 1668-1672.

<sup>17</sup> Kimberly Dawn Farris, “Innovative ways to address mental health needs of African Americans: An exploratory study examining the importance of understanding how African American Clergy conceptualize and attribute causation of mental illness” (PhD diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Dr. Sherrill McMillan was interviewed by the author on April 23, 2018.

Theology of Virginia Union University offered dual degrees in conjunction with other schools, as a Master of Divinity/Master of Social Work and a Master of Divinity/Master of Science in Patient Counseling degree to improve mental health training. Howard University's School of Divinity was criticized in the report for failing to offer any dual degree programs with the university's Medical School, School of Social Work, or certifications in mental health training. Courses in mental health training appeared to be on an elective basis. American Baptist College offered a Master of Arts in Pastoral Studies Clinical Counseling that prepared graduates for the state of Tennessee licensure in Clinical Pastoral Therapy and Marriage and Family Therapy.<sup>19</sup>

### **No Church in the Wild: Black Millennials, Faith, and Religion**

Dr. McMillan believes that a growing number of black millennials are moving away from the church due to a generational divide, homophobia, and reluctance to address issues that older church members may not feel comfortable dealing with because they are viewed as sinful or something that can be prayed away. She adds:

As a result, growing numbers of young adults and teens are looking to social media and music to find spiritual healing. This [behavior] points to the need for more churches and pastors to get on board so that we can minister to people in a broader context to meet them where they are.<sup>20</sup>

The Barna Group, a private, non-partisan, for-profit organization, surveyed 843 Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 about their reasons for and against church attendance. According to their findings, "two in five say the church is not important because they can find God elsewhere (39%), and one-third say it's because the church is not personally relevant to them (35%). More than one-third say their negative perceptions are a result of moral failures in church leadership (35%). And substantial majorities of Millennials who don't go to church say they see Christians as judgmental (87%), hypocritical (85%), anti-homosexual (91%) and insensitive to others (70%)."<sup>21</sup>

*Huffington Post* reports that even though black millennials still attend church at higher rates than other millennials, many are church hopping because they have a difficult time finding churches that speak to them. The report says that some black millennials are seeking out nondenominational institutions where they are allowed to dress more casually, and they find music and sermons that are more contemporary. They also find that services do not shy away from discussing issues like police brutality which might be causing them mental and emotional trauma.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Davis and Thompkins, "Mental Health Education in African American Divinity/Theology Schools."

<sup>20</sup> Excerpts from an interview with Dr. McMillan.

<sup>21</sup> "What Millennials Want When They Visit Church," March 4, 2015, accessed April 24, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/what-millennials-want-when-they-visit-church/>

<sup>22</sup> Tyree A. Boyd-Pates, "Why Black Millennials Are Hopping from Church-to-Church," December

Since the 1990s no Gospel artist has been more successful connecting to black millennials than Kirk Franklin, with his blend of contemporary gospel and Hip Hop. Franklin's hit songs have garnered airplay not just on Sunday mornings, but also on secular radio stations and in Hip Hop clubs. Besides having beats that mirror those used for secular music, his songs address issues facing young adults and teens. Franklin has collaborated with many secular Hip Hop artists. He delivered the benediction after Kanye West's "Ultralight Beam." At first glance, Franklin's relationship with Kanye may appear at odds with his overall message. However, Kanye West has *tried* to walk a fine line between the sacred and the profane dating back to his 2003 debut album, *The College Dropout*. Pastor T.D. Jakes introduced Kanye at the 2004 Black Entertainment Television (BET) Awards. Kanye rose from his pew and walked up to the pulpit on the stage to perform his song "Jesus Walks" alongside gospel music legend Yolanda Adams, an African American church choir, and liturgical dancers dressed in white. An energetic Kanye did a *praise* dance on the stage covered with white candles. "Do you know about Jesus," sang Yolanda Adams and the choir. Kanye left the stage and went into the audience, who were all standing up and swaying along with the music. Rev. Tony Lee, at the time the youth pastor of the Ebenezer A.M.E. Church in Fort Washington, Maryland, invited Kanye to perform for that congregation. According to Rev. Lee, over 300 young people walked up to the pulpit to give their life to Christ that day.

Scholar Monica Miller referred to Kanye's "Jesus Walks" as a liberating theological facelift that reminded the public that Jesus was "kickin' it" with those outcasts who were criminal and deviant."<sup>23</sup> Miller says that some Kanye fans viewed his other song "No Church in the Wild," from his 2009 collaboration album with Jay-Z, *Watch The Throne*, as a statement about the way millennials perceive their style of worship. Rather than attending the traditional church, Christian and "un-churched" millennials are "finding 'cathartic release and social transformation' in music today - especially Hip Hop."<sup>24</sup> Kanye promoted his sixth album, *Yeezus* (2013), with a tour that was a spectacle of self-aggrandizement and religious iconography. Kanye's concert set included a 50-foot high mountain dubbed "Mt. Yeezus" which led to a triangular center stage serving as the hallowed ground for his 12 female dancers in white robes who carried candles. As Kanye performed the album's most polarizing track, "I Am a God," the women held him up in the air. Additional props on the stage were a golden cross and angel wings. The climactic moment of the concert came when an actor dressed as Jesus came on the stage. The concert ended with Jesus ascending atop the mountain as Kanye and his dancers knelt to pray. For his *Saint Pablo* tour three years later, Kanye took concertgoers to church with

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7, 2017. Accessed April 24, 2018, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/tyree-a-boydpates/this-is-why-black-millenn\\_b\\_9640358.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/tyree-a-boydpates/this-is-why-black-millenn_b_9640358.html)

<sup>23</sup> Richard W. Santana and Gregory Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture: Rescripting the Sacred* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2016), 106.

<sup>24</sup> Monica R. Miller, "God of the New Slaves or Slave to the Ideas of Religion and God?" in *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West*, ed. Julius Bailey (Basingstoke, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 167-179.

uplifting performances of “Ultralight Beam.”<sup>25</sup> In 2019 Kanye began hosting his “Sunday Services,” which feature a concert by a live gospel choir and band. The choir sings traditional gospel songs and gospel renditions of his mainstream hits. Kanye hosted a special Sunday Service on Easter Sunday morning at the 2019 Coachella Valley Music and Arts Music Festival.

### **Father Stretch My Hands: Black Clergy’s Thoughts on Hip Hop**

How do African American pastors view the influence of Kanye West and other Hip Hop artists on millennials who are unsatisfied with the traditional church experience? In order to answer this question, I interviewed four pastors under the age of 45 who, in July 2017, were working with a sizable millennial population. These pastors are or have been fans of Hip Hop. My interviewees included Rev. Nathaniel J. Yates, Sr., (Pastor Nate), the former youth pastor at Metropolitan Baptist Church in Largo, MD; Rev. Jeffrey Allen Johnson, II (Pastor Jay), an associate pastor at Eastern Star Church in Indianapolis, Indiana; Rev. Larrin Robertson (Rev. Larrin), the senior pastor of Word For Life Church Ministries in Fort Washington, Maryland; and Rev. Ronald E.F. Triplett (Pastor Ron), the lead pastor of Gethsemane United Methodist Church in Capitol Heights, Maryland. I conducted a follow-up interview with Pastor Nate in May 2018.

Pastor Nate said in 2017:

As it relates to their impact on mental health, I would contend that the mental state of those that I hope to bring into the church is impacted by far more than a rapper’s description of things in the “bars” they write. The situations that they describe resonate because they are viewable even in the communities where millennials live. It is this common picture that draws millennials to their music; the common questions being, “who am I, why is my life what it is, and how do I become more?” Lyrics like “We Gone Be Alright” call on a group of people who feel the harsh reality of feeling like there is no answer to their suffering, even in the church.<sup>26</sup>

Pastor Nate notes that for earlier generations, hope was garnered by leaders who spoke out and acted to improve the situations of those in the community. By contrast, he says that today there are communities with several thriving churches, however, the neighborhood lacks the presence of hope. When some churches thrive, and their direct impact on their communities does not appear to match their own success, cognitive dissonance occurs. Pastor Nate suggests that the perception of hypocrisy, however faulty the logic, sends millennials running either from the church, or in the direction of a church that will accept them, speak to real issues in a relevant manner, and, when necessary, do

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<sup>25</sup> Other notable artists have included 2Pac, DMX, Lauryn Hill, J. Cole, Chance the Rapper, and Kendrick Lamar. Anthony Pinn argues that 2Pac’s song “Black Jesus” identifies with the everyday struggles of those who are hopeless and discarded as wastes such as crack addicts, drug dealers, thugs, and poor single mothers. Cornel West observes that many rappers relate their conditions to the suffering and redemption symbolized by Jesus Christ.

<sup>26</sup> Rev. Nathaniel Yates was interviewed on July 11, 2017.

more than just speak.<sup>27</sup>

Pastor Jay cautioned:

We make fun of people who go out and seek therapy. Maybe it's because those people living with mental illness aren't getting the help they need from the church go out seeking it from a figure like Kanye West. From the perspective of the church, we have to do a better job being more transparent. These artists speak to the heart and soul of our generation. Historically, black music has always come out of experiences of oppression. Fast forward today, and you hear that in hip hop. You hear the souls of these artists crying out. If you listen closely, you will hear the Gospels in the music of Chance The Rapper, J. Cole, and Lecrae. Theologically speaking I always say that [Israel's] King David is the first gangsta rapper. If you read his story, he got caught up in all of this craziness from adultery to killing people. He wrote about it, and these rappers express similar feelings in their lyrics.<sup>28</sup>

Pastor Larrin observed:

Hip Hop requires its practitioners and its adherents to reflect on a multitude of life and cultural experiences. The vast catalog from which one chooses to explore narrows the field only by theme, leaving open for analysis how one will examine and report on their experience. There is not one clear lens through which all analysis takes place. This avails space for creative being within the culture as lived or expressed by the artist. In the same way, faith permits its practitioners space to examine their thoughts, intentions, motivations, and actions.

Pastor Larrin's concern about the faith of Christians, generally, as well as millennials, stems from his observation that, for many, faith in the Lord Jesus for eternal salvation is being replaced by faith in the Lord Jesus for temporal satisfaction. He wants them to remember that the Christian faith was neither born nor developed during a time of peace for its adherents. The message he wants to emphasize is that we are the spiritual offspring of persons who have endured hardships. He quickly adds:

Where I am not concerned is with the ability of millennials to navigate the empty spaces created by the absence of answers to the questions they are asking. First, I determine to credit young adults, namely, today's millennials, with the ability to navigate spiritual and mental health complexities with a skill that exceeds my own at the same stage of development. I believe that those who can ask these questions are capable also of holding on until revelation comes. In an era of deepening concern about the church's ability to attract, engage, welcome, and disciple millennials - both members and non-members alike - I view the influence of hip hop as I do other aspects of the culture. Some elements of hip hop should be considered, others condemned. My concern is that the church will determine not to blur the line such that the culture no longer views the church as distinct.<sup>29</sup>

Pastor Ron believes music is just as influential and powerful for millennials as it is/was for older generations. The difference is that our culture has shifted, especially as it relates to religion in our country. Christianity, more specifically, the church, was more

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<sup>27</sup> Rev. Nathaniel Yates was interviewed on May 4, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Rev. Jeffrey Allen Johnson was interviewed on July 14, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Rev. Larrin Robertson was interviewed on July 20, 2017.

of an anchor of most communities, black, white, Hispanic or other in our country. He surmises that while people in earlier generations may have been entertained and motivated by the music they listened to, the bulk of their religious and moral instruction was still received through their communities of faith.

Pastor Ron says,

Since there is a rising number of millennials who choose not to engage their faith through the vehicle of the traditional church, they are not hearing or resonating with a sermon from the pulpit on Sunday or a Sunday school class, lesson or teacher. To some, artists such as Kanye, Drake, Jay-Z, Nas, Common, and others have become the preachers, Sunday school teachers, mothers, fathers and missionaries having a major influence on the faith, mentality, and philosophy of those who listen. It is my belief that Hip Hop, Rap, and any other form of music can be used to accomplish "God's plan" and purpose in the lives of God's people.<sup>30</sup>

### Searching for Solace in a Sunken Place: The Hip Hop Dilemma

Kanye West made the following statement during an interview. "My music isn't just music – it's medicine. Every time I make an album, I'm trying to make a cure for cancer musically."<sup>31</sup> Kanye has always used his music as a therapeutic source to deal with emotional issues and personal challenges. His mother Dr. Donda West passed away as the result of complications from a cosmetic surgical procedure on November 10, 2007. She had undergone liposuction, a tummy tuck, and a breast reduction, a day before fatally collapsing in her home.<sup>32</sup> Following her untimely death, Kanye released *808s & Heartbreak*, a melancholy album performed by singing through an auto-tune vocoder. *808s*, which sounded like a long musical lamentation, focused on themes of mourning, loneliness, depression, doubt, and angst.

Kanye has dealt with bouts of depression and anxiety since his mother's passing. He admitted to pondering suicide in a June 2018 *New York Times* interview.<sup>33</sup> His past erratic fits led to much speculation over his mental health. Danielle Belton, the managing editor of *The Root*, posted an article in February 2016 insinuating that Kanye West was showing signs of bipolar disorder or some form of mental illness. Belton, who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder years ago, wrote the article from her personal experiences of ignoring the warning signs that led to her emotional breakdown. She often masked her illness at parties with excessive drinking, self-deprecating humor, and by

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<sup>30</sup> An interview with Rev. Ronald E.F. Triplett was conducted on July 21, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Kevin Zimmerman, "For Kanye West, Music is Medicine." *BMI*. March 23, 2006. Accessed July 24, 2017. [www.bmi.com/news/entry/for\\_kanye\\_west\\_music\\_is\\_medicine](http://www.bmi.com/news/entry/for_kanye_west_music_is_medicine).

<sup>32</sup> Amy Mackelden, "Kanye West Just Announced His New Album Is Related to His Mother's Death." *Bazaar*. April 29, 2018. Accessed May 9, 2018. <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/celebrity/latest/a20093405/how-did-donda-west-die-kanye-west/>.

<sup>33</sup> Lisa Respers France, "Kanye West says he considered suicide and shares what helped him." *CNN*. June 26, 2018. Accessed June 27, 2018.

making herself the center of everyone's attention. "I don't know what issues West does or doesn't have; but I know that he drops verses about Lexapro and Xanax, two drugs I'm familiar with in my own journey from bipolarity to stability," wrote Belton.<sup>34</sup>

Belton's article followed several disturbing outbursts from Kanye. He begged his fans to tweet, FaceTime, Facebook, and Instagram Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and Google Inc., co-founder Lawrence Page to give him the money to support his Yeezy fashion line which had put him \$53 million in debt. The series of angry tweets came nearly 24 hours after Kanye debuted two new songs from his forthcoming album *The Life of Pablo* on *Saturday Night Live* (SNL). His behavior was unusually frenetic on stage that evening. Thirty minutes before the show came on the air, he had a backstage meltdown because he was irritated with SNL executives because of an abrupt alteration to his stage. Kanye began screaming, threatened to leave, and compared himself to filmmaker Stanley Kubrick, the Apostle Paul, Pablo Picasso, and the drug lord Pablo Escobar. He proclaimed himself to be fifty percent more influential than anyone else on Earth.

During concerts for his 2016 Saint Pablo tour he would stop the music to go on 30-minute rants. On November 19, 2016, Kanye appeared in Sacramento, California. After making fans wait 90 minutes for him to start the concert, he performed three songs and then went on a 30-minute profanity-laced tirade, dropped his mic, walked off the stage and abruptly concluded the concert. A couple of days later Kanye West canceled the remaining 21 shows on the tour. Days later the police were called to his trainer Harley Pasternak's home. Kanye's erratic behavior forced paramedics to transport him to the Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center for evaluation. He was hospitalized at the Resnick Neuropsychiatric Hospital at UCLA for eight days.<sup>35</sup>

After a long absence from social media and the public, Kanye was interviewed on a broadcast of TMZ. He talked about his support for controversial President Donald Trump and admitted that his hospitalization was caused by an opioid addiction which resulted from elective liposuction surgery in 2016 to lose weight. The interview went viral due to Kanye's insistence that 400 years of slavery was a "choice" for black people. He later tried to clarify that he was referring to mental slavery and a victim mentality, not the physical act of forced bondage. Charlamagne Tha God and Andrew Schultz discussed the TMZ interview on their podcast, *The Brilliant Idiots*. Schultz wondered how much of Kanye's public breakdown on the TMZ was due to anxiety, medication, or something else related to his mental health.

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<sup>34</sup> Danielle Belton, "Kanye West Doesn't Need Another Think Piece; He Needs Therapy." *The Root*, February 16, 2016. Accessed January 17, 2017. [http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2016/02/kanye\\_west\\_doesn\\_t\\_need\\_another\\_think\\_piece\\_he\\_needs\\_therapy/2/](http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2016/02/kanye_west_doesn_t_need_another_think_piece_he_needs_therapy/2/).

<sup>35</sup> Natalie Stone, "Inside Kanye West's Breakdown: Rapper Feels Like 'He's Under Spiritual Attack,' Source Says." *People*, November 22, 2016. Accessed January 18, 2017. <http://people.com/celebrity/kanye-west-feels-like-hes-under-spiritual-attack/>.

Charlamagne, author of *Shook One: Anxiety Playing Tricks on Me*, conducted a nearly two-hour exclusive one-on-one interview with Kanye on April 18, 2018. Charlamagne's first question was about the current state of Kanye's mental health. He admitted to being on "meds," but refused to say what kind of or how much medication he was taking. Kanye referred to his breakdown as a "breakthrough." He said that he wanted to change the stigma associated with mental health. He believes that critics call him "crazy" to diminish the value of his creativity and free thought. When Charlamagne asked him if he was receiving therapy, Kanye's response was, "the world is my therapist." He said that he found more relief and healing by seeking advice from friends, family members, and people he meets rather than a professional clinician who lacks a personal relationship with him. Kanye's wife Kim Kardashian West brought in celebrity life coach Tony Robbins to counsel him. Charlamagne failed to ask Kanye how much of a role his faith has played in his breakthrough. Nor did he ask him if any pastors were included among the friends who were serving as his therapists.

Mental health is an underlying theme on his eighth studio album, *Ye*, released on June 1, 2018. On the album's cover are the words "I hate being Bi-Polar/It's awesome." Kanye admitted to being diagnosed with bipolar disorder, at 39, during an interview with radio host Big Boy the night before the album's release and again on the album's second track, "Yikes."

*"They take me on meds, off meds ask yourself... That's my third person.  
That's my bipolar shit, nigga what?  
That's my superpower, nigga ain't no disability.  
I'm a superhero! I'm a superhero! Agghhhh!"*<sup>36</sup>

Kanye addressed his condition again on *Kids See Ghosts*, a 2018 collaborative album with Kid Cudi (Scott Mescudi). He provided his most in-depth analysis of his condition on the season two debut episode of David Letterman's Netflix series, *My Next Guest Needs No Introduction*. Kanye admits to not taking his prescribed medicine or receiving professional therapy. How much of his "disturbing" behavior in recent years can be blamed for this negligence? Should his behavior be excused due to his health condition? A growing number of individuals from the African American community have rebuked him, relegating him to the film *Get Out*'s metaphorical "sunken place" due to his love for President Donald Trump.<sup>37</sup> More importantly, what does Kanye's current behavior mean for millennials who relied on his music to cope with depression, anxiety, suicide, or a loss of faith? I spoke to Ms. Lauren Chanel Allen on May 3, 2018, to see if she still uses Kanye's music to deal with her depression and questions about faith. Lauren said:

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<sup>36</sup> Kanye West, "Yikes," *Ye* (GOOD Music/Def Jam, 2018).

<sup>37</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, "I'm Not Black, I'm Kanye: Kanye West Wants Freedom—White Freedom," *The Atlantic*, May 7, 2018. Accessed May 11, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/05/im-not-black-im-kanye/559763/>.

I've long wrestled with the question of "can you separate the art from the artist" or what is now commonly referred to as "cancel culture." I think often of the lyrics to Kendrick Lamar's song "Mortal Man." I want to leave room for Black people to be problematic. My personal credo (and I don't know if this is a cop-out) is if you are actively harming someone, I can't keep supporting. Then there's Kanye. I essentially grew up on Kanye. I was 14 and just starting high school when *College Dropout* came out. Ye wasn't like anyone else. He was kinda lame and didn't fit into rap at the time, but very arrogant. And I mean what weird teenager can't relate to that? He grew, got bigger, told us George Bush didn't care about Black people, declared with all his heart that Beyoncé had the best music video of all time, and in general made it okay to be insecure. He also gave us "Izzo" and *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. Then in 2016 after 50+ women accused Bill Cosby of drugging and raping them, Kanye Omari West tweeted "BILL COSBY INNOCENT!!!!!" and I officially separated the man from the music. Everyone has their line. He egregiously crossed mine. As someone who had experienced sexual assault, I was physiologically repulsed by Kanye, the person.

For the last two years, I've been able to "separate the art and the artist" and enjoyed Kanye West's music as much as I did when I first discovered him - if not more. But then the "slavery sounds like a choice" stuff happened. Going back to my line-- that crossed it. You cannot and will not disrespect my ancestors like that. Kanye's songs come on shuffle, and I just don't feel the passion I did. His words sound empty, his music a farce. And that sucks. I mourn the loss of the relationship I had to Kanye's music. If other people still get something out of his music - especially like I did with my depression and "Ultralight Beam," I see no problem with it. In fact, I hope that's still the case. I'm not a churchgoer any longer, yet I still have a gospel playlist that uplifts me. Maybe Kanye's music will do that again for me one day. But not now.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

This research has enlightened me on multiple issues related to black millennials, their faith, and their mental health. In terms of millennials' faith, the black church needs to be more mindful of issues facing today's young adults and teens. When millennials feel alienated and disconnected from the church, they will seek other paths - such as hip hop - to find God. Pastor Nate warns against millennials expecting too much from Kanye or any other musician. He says,

While there may be flaws that people [readily see] among those in the church, I come to the same conclusion that the message is received at the level that the messenger is believed. I would not encourage anyone to gain their theology from those who lack the evidence of following Christ. It is interesting that people will give him a pass because they like his music in the same way that some give politicians a break because of their party. Kanye and others have shown that by adding a little religion to their music that they would gain credibility. I do not believe this to be valid. The issue as I've stated in the past is that those who profess faith don't always walk in it, therefore becoming stumbling blocks for those who have less of a foundation and even some who have faith. No person should look to Kanye for their faith. This is true beyond him. What does the lifestyle of the person reflect? What do the scriptures say? Too many of us are looking to others to feed our faith like a baby bird waits for their mother, instead of studying for themselves. When people say the messenger does not matter, I would ask would they believe the words of a notorious liar, or marry someone notorious for cheating? The answer would be no. Likewise, would they follow someone whose life does not reflect their words, and if they do match their words, do their words match the Word of God? We should walk according to the Word, not according to the fame of

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<sup>38</sup> Lauren Chanel Allen was interviewed on May 3, 2018.

someone whose life does not reflect Christian principles.<sup>39</sup>

In terms of mental health awareness in the African American community, there is still a stigma associated with it. Several black churches and pastors are still not fully equipped to provide the proper therapeutic counsel to their members. Prayer is not a sufficient solution to mental illness. Likewise, uplifting music – be it Gospel or hip hop – is not a solution either. Rev. Danielle Graham concludes:

Mental health is not something that a song or album can fix. You can feel better for the moment, but you are not cured. This is the same [outcome] with church folk saying pray about it. Praying does not stop you from wanting to die. Kanye’s music cannot stop you from wanting to die. I don’t like when people say you choose to be happy. You can choose things in your life that make you happy, but that does not guarantee happiness. It’s not just an emotion. For example, people with mental illness like me have to have positive thoughts, eat well, exercise, etc. But those things alone may only help my energy level, but not pick me up from a downswing. Sometimes you need professional counseling and medication.<sup>40</sup>

Lauren Chanel Allen says:

I would definitely tell others to seek professional therapy if they are experiencing symptoms of depression. I think music is a spiritual experience that can help you through things and help you figure out things and is an important aid, but you must go with the mental health professionals.<sup>41</sup>

In my work with the young adult ministry at my church, I have tried to be conscious of their concerns and needs. We launched a Friday night service geared towards millennials, and offered focused Bible studies, open forums, and discussions on topics such as self-care and mental wellness. Although emphasis is placed on the scriptures and forming a close relationship with Christ, the ministry always refers anyone experiencing mental health issues to a professional mental health clinician who can accurately diagnose them. Faith in God can certainly help individuals, just as music can uplift one’s soul. But these cannot diminish the vital role of professional therapy.

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<sup>39</sup> Rev. Nathaniel Yates was interviewed on May 4, 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Rev. Danielle Graham was interviewed on May 1, 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Lauren Chanel Allen was interviewed on May 3, 2018.

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