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# Soulful Leadership: How Black Presidents Engage Critical Spirituality in their Leadership of Historically Black Theological Institutions

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# SOULFUL LEADERSHIP: HOW BLACK PRESIDENTS ENGAGE CRITICAL SPIRITUALITY IN THEIR LEADERSHIP OF HISTORICALLY BLACK THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to reflect upon one vitally important, but widely unexamined, aspect of Historically Black Theological Institutions (HBTIs): the experiences of its Black presidents and their use of critical spirituality (Dantley, 2005) to overcome personal and professional obstacles, challenge assumptions of institutional inferiority and deficiency, and engage in the struggle for physical and psychological freedom for HBTI constituents and the communities they serve. Three current or former HBTI presidents, all self-identified as Black men, were represented in this study. An interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology and its ensuing research methods guided the study's scope. A priori coding was utilized from Dantley's (2005) critical spirituality framework and Bridges' (2001) African American spirituality framework to analyze HBTI presidents' experiences. The data collected and analyzed served to answer the foundational question of this study: How do Black presidents engage critical spirituality in their leadership of HBTIs?

# DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to my ancestors: those who I can name and those whose names I don't know but whose legacy gave me the will to hope, persevere, and imagine even greater days. Thank you for your care towards me and your collective spirit and wisdom that guides me. To those who have stood and stand with me: Daphne, Faith, and Amir. I wouldn't be here without you. Daphne, you are the true doctor. Pops, I had it in me all along.

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This project would not have come to life without the insights, stories, and unwavering commitment of the presidents who participated in this study. I sincerely appreciate each of you. Thank you for investing your time and energy into me and this project.

To my committee chair, Dr. Natasha Croom. Thank you for supporting me through this study and throughout my doctoral journey. I stand at the other side of this process, in large part, because of your wisdom, teaching, and guidance. Your scholarship and leadership continue to inspire me. I look up to you.

To my committee: Dr. Rachel Wagner, Dr. Robin Phelps-Ward, and Dr. Nafees Khan. I cannot say thank you enough. I could not ask for a better committee. Thank you for your commitment to my intellectual and personal development.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF FIGURES

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

"Many of the problems we face are not a matter of a lack of resources;

It's a matter of a lack of imagination."

(Williams, 2019)

On September 13, 2019, Matthew Williams, the Interim President of The Interdenominational Theological Center, invited stakeholders of the school to participate in a visioning session for the Historically Black Theological Institution (HBTI). During that gathering, President Williams used stories laced with spiritual undertones and the resilience of people of African descent to focus attention on celebrating the institution's ability to persevere despite past or present challenges. The epitaph above from President Williams's words to the students, faculty, staff, and alumni of the HBTI speaks to my desire to explore spirituality and presidential leadership within HBTIs.

*My personal and professional life experiences and the foundational role spirituality has played within them brings me to this study at the intersection of spirituality and leadership of HBTIs. Spirituality, and its many nuanced definitions, became an interest of mine after my dad's death when I turned 13. My father's death compelled me to grapple with theological questions about life – especially life as a Black child growing up in a nearly all-White small town in the South. My questions also led me to one of the few predominately Black faith communities in town. There I discovered an inextricable link between spirituality and the will to resist narratives and systems of oppression that often negated Black people's being.*

*Though there were many definitions of what spirituality was within that community, it was clear that the elusive concept of spirituality was deeply rooted in the way people moved, faced systems of oppression, overcame obstacles, and dreamt of a more just future. Spirituality in that Black faith community was more than an intellectual exploration of a transcendent deity or the need to practice rigid rituals within a specific religious tradition. Spirituality inspired action. I slowly simmered in that crockpot of Black spiritual and religious thought and life. Drawn from that deep well of personal and professional experiences are the seeds of this study.*

This study's heartbeat came to life during a graduate course entitled Critical Race Theory (CRT) in Education. CRT posits that race is a social and legal construction invented and manipulated by White people to maintain power over people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Lopez, 2006). CRT maintains that racism is infused so deeply into the soul of American society that it often goes unnoticed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Near the end of the course, the professor introduced the class to "The Space Traders," a video based on a short story written by Derrick Bell (1992). In that video, extraterrestrials arrive on Earth to offer the United States wealth and technological advances far beyond the U.S. government's imagination and abilities in exchange for all the nation's Black people. The video's premise hinged on the idea that the U.S. would make such a transaction if given the opportunity.

While there were many captivating and disturbing moments in "The Space Traders," one scene stood out. It was a scene where people gathered at a local faith community to voice their hopes and fears related to the alien request and the U.S.

government's response. The Black spiritual leader's voice struck me as he critiqued governmental officials and led the congregation of people in singing. That scene – especially the faith leader's use of spirituality to speak towards significant issues affecting Black people – reminded me of the critically conscious Black faith leaders I experienced as a child. The scene also made me wonder if any critical frameworks focused attention on spirituality and educational leadership. My curiosity, coupled with my professional and academic backgrounds, led me to explore literature concentrating on spirituality and administrative leadership at HBTIs.

I discovered a consistent image when peering into the literature: few scholars focused on spirituality as a critical framework. There were also minuscule amounts of literature dedicated to HBTIs, HBTI presidents' experiences, and the role that spirituality played within the leadership practices of HBTI presidents. With these gaps in mind, this study hopes to contribute to the literature on critical spirituality as a framework, theological education in the U.S. (especially historically Black theological education), and presidential leadership of HBTIs.

## Statement of the Problem

Historically Black Theological Institutions (HBTIs) collectively graduate the most Black theologians in the world, yet their existence and influence are widely unknown (Albritton, 2012; Brown, 2013; Ricard, Brown, & Foster, 2008). When acknowledged, HBTIs are recognized as relics of the past, a bygone era of theological education, and as second-class institutions ripe with issues of enrollment, staffing, and leadership (Cherry,

1995; Felder, 2001; Ricard, Brown, & Foster, 2008; Wheeler et al., 2006). Literature highlights three additional thematic problems related to HBTIs and their presidents.

First, there is a lack of literature detailing the experiences, challenges, and successes of Black presidents of HBTIs. In the inaugural address of Alton Pollard, former Dean of the Howard University School of Theology, Dean Pollard said: "Black theological education is one of the most significant and unheralded stories in all of higher education" (Pollard, 2008, p. 3). His words ring true within the literature on the subject. Few scholars have written about historically Black theological education in the U.S. (Costen, 2014; Lincoln & Mamiya; 1990; Pollard, 2008). Within the studies focused on HBTIs, only one directly engaged Black and ethnic presidents of HBTIs (Wheeler et al., 2006). Other studies have detailed the emergence of institutionalized theological education in the U.S. (Aleshire, Campbell, & Mannoia, 2006; Cherry, 1995; Naylor, 1977). However, their research failed to provide a substantive exploration of HBTIs or the experiences of HBTI presidents. More research is needed to gain a better appreciation of the presidential leadership role within HBTIs. This study focuses specific attention on the experiences of Black presidents at HBTIs.

The second problem is that few studies provide an anti-deficit-based lens for viewing historically Black theological education and its leadership. Scholars (Beach, 1986; Cherry, 1995; Wilmore, 1987) have provided some insight into Black students' experiences of pursuing theological education. Unfortunately, their research focused significant attention on Black students' deficits at Predominately White Theological Institutions (PWTIs). Other studies highlighted HBTIs as second-class institutions

lacking the vibrancy, leadership, and resources of PWTIs (Felder, 2001; Ricard, Brown, & Foster, 2008; Wheeler et al., 2006). Additionally, few of these studies shared insights into what it is like to lead an HBTI. This study aims to share narratives of strength, hope, and resilience among presidents of HBTIs.

The third problem is that limited research focuses on critical spirituality and administrative leadership within higher education. Some studies note the connection between spirituality and executive leadership in education (Beer, 2012; Houston, Blankstein, Cole, 2008). However, Dantley (2003, 2005) differentiates critical spirituality from previous educational scholars' notions of spirituality. Scholars have used Dantley's critical spirituality framework (Dantley, 2005; McCray, Beachum, & Yawn, 2012; Scanlan, 2011). However, their research focused on critical spirituality among school principals in predominately Black communities within major U.S. cities. Therefore, this study aims to expand Dantley's critical spirituality framework to include presidents' voices within higher education.

Dantley (2005) does not fully articulate what African American prophetic spirituality is within his critical spirituality framework. Because this study's focus is on presidents of HBTIs and their use of critical spirituality, HBTI president's insights may expand Dantley's notion of African American prophetic spirituality and its link to the critical spirituality framework. Because the concept of African American prophetic spirituality is not fully explained, this study will also use an African American spirituality conceptual analysis framework (Chandler, 2017; Newlin et al., 2002) in conjunction with critical spirituality (Dantley, 2005) to analyze the data from Black HBTI presidents.

## The Purpose and Research Questions

"We have to talk about liberating minds as well as liberating society."

– Angela Davis

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to reflect upon one vitally important, but widely unexamined, aspect of HBTIs: the experiences of its Black presidents and their use of critical spirituality (Dantley, 2005) to overcome personal and professional obstacles, challenge assumptions of institutional inferiority and deficiency, and engage in the struggle for physical and psychological freedom for HBTI constituents and the communities they serve.

*My curiosity for understanding spirituality and Black presidents' experiences at HBTIs emerged during graduation rehearsals at The Interdenominational Theological Center. During graduation rehearsals, an argument arose that seemed to smother the room's positive energy. The discussion was between the Interdenominational Theological Center's president and a president from one of The Interdenominational Theological Center's constituent seminaries. It was tense and ironic because more than 150 Black theologians were about to graduate from the institution. Then the unthinkable happened. The Interdenominational Theological Center president informed the constituent seminary students that they would not be graduating with their seminary's name on their degree. Unfortunately, I was a student in that seminary. That moment was painful. Breathtaking. Yet, it kindled my curiosity to understand the role of the HBTI presidency.*

### Why Study Presidents?

Studies on presidential leadership in higher education are well documented (Rabovsky & Rutherford, 2016; Trachtenberg & Blumer, 2008). However, Lewis and Weems (2006) argued that "only those who have occupied the role of a seminary president know the special demands, challenges, opportunities, stresses, and joys of the job" (p. xi). They add that the seminary president "stands at the center point of an institution" and metaphorically sits "on a hot seat of a daily struggle to understand to fulfill the seminary's mission while maintaining its economic vitality" (Lewis & Weems, 2006, p. xi). Studying the role of HBTI presidents will provide the opportunity to explore the depth and breadth of the HBTI and the ways its leaders affect positive change within the institutions they serve and beyond.

**Research Questions:**

1. How do Black presidents engage critical spirituality in their leadership of HBTIs?

## Research Design Layout

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) guides this study. Jonathan Smith (1996) first articulated IPA in his research on the nexus between clinical psychology and mainstream psychology. IPA is grounded in Heidegger's (1962) work, who argued that any description of a phenomenon requires the researcher to provide some form of interpretation. Resultantly, IPA attempts to make meaning of experience by employing a double hermeneutic (Matau & Van der Wal, 2015; Moustakas, 1994; Van der Zalm & Bergum, 2000; van Manen, 2015). Using IPA in this study created the opportunity to experience the professional lifeworld of HBTI presidents.

## Overview of Theoretical and Analytical Frameworks

### Critical Spirituality

This study used critical spirituality (Dantley, 2005) as its theoretical framework and a fusion of critical spirituality and African American spirituality (Bridges, 2001) as its analytical framework. Dantley (2005) described critical spirituality as a leadership theory that combines critical theory and themes within African American prophetic spirituality to help educational leaders improve themselves and the higher education institutions they serve. Dantley (2003, 2005) contends that "African American spirituality is grounded in juxtaposing the truth of social, cultural, and political realities with a hope of dismantling and constructing a different reality grounded in equity and social justice" (p. 216). His work focuses attention on the ability to reshape challenging narratives into hopeful ones. As such, Dantley's (2003) theory of critical spirituality is appropriate to explore Black presidents' experiences at HBTIs. Critical spirituality provides four frames for analyzing the role, intentions, and actions of educational leaders:

- Critical Self-Reflection
- Deconstructive Interpretation
- Performative Creativity
- Transformative Action

Intentionally aimed at educational leaders, critical spirituality moves from introspective observations about oneself to actions that transform educational institutions and society.

### African American Spirituality

Unlike many college and university presidents, most Black HBTI presidents have certifications (i.e., ordinations) from Christian denominations – in addition to a connection to The Black Church tradition. African American spirituality provides a rich lens for peering into people's experiences with The Black Church and other predominately Black faith traditions (Bridges, 2001; Chandler, 2017; Newlin et al., 2002). Additionally, Dantley (2005) developed his critical spirituality framework after reading Bridges (2001) African American spirituality. In Bridges' (2001) analysis of African American spirituality, she identified four themes that broadly coincide with pieces of Dantley's critical spirituality framework. Those four themes are:

1. A Unified Worldview
2. Black Peoples Self -Definition of Human Identity
3. Spirituality Embodied as the Call to Protest
4. The Quest for Community

Combining African American spirituality and critical spirituality enables this study to capture the experiences of HBTI leaders. Using both frameworks also highlights the influence of personal spirituality on each president's professional life at HBTIs. Bridges' (2001) African American spirituality also helps to engage gaps in Dantley's (2005) framework, particularly his reference to African American prophetic spirituality by reflecting upon the influence of spirituality on Black HBTI presidents.

## Limitations and Delimitations

This study is about Black presidents at HBTIs. While there are many avenues for research related to the HBTI, this study will not venture down those paths. Resultantly,

this is not a study about HBTI students, staff, alumni, governing boards, or faculty. This study also excludes any detailed description of Catholic theological education. Historically, there are two distinct branches within institutionalized theological education in the U.S.: Catholic and Protestant. This study does not focus on Catholic theological education, as all HBTIs situate themselves within the Protestant Christian tradition or no religious tradition. It is not an attempt to understand Christianity or the proliferation of Christianity in America. This study is solely about critical spirituality and the experiences of Black presidents at HBTIs.

*At times, I am nervous about this study. I am a graduate of an HBTI, not a former president of one. Nor have I ever been. Carrying the mantle of presidential leadership in theological education is foreign to me. As a former student of an HBTI and now a professional in higher education's spiritual and religious life, I find it troublesome when people downgrade my experiences as a graduate of Black theological education.*

## Significance of the Study

This study will contribute to the limited amount of literature on theological education, especially Historically Black theological education and its leadership. It will also expand critical spirituality as a framework. Looking through Black HBTI presidents' lens, this study shares narratives of hope, achievement, resiliency, faith, and success, stories that have too often been neglected within HBTI discourse. Ultimately, this study provides the opportunity for readers to hear about HBTIs through the lived experiences of HBTI presidents in an attempt to compel individuals to invest more deeply into their holistic existence.

HBTIs and their presidents work to prepare leaders to serve people – particularly predominately Black churches and communities (Earl, 2003; Franklin, 2007; Lewis & Weems, 2006). They are a critical link in the pipeline connecting Black communities and congregations with academically trained theologians. As such, the need for operationally sound HBTIs and HBTI leadership is pertinent. Following this line of thought, if HBTIs work to prepare a pool of predominately Black faith leaders for professional roles within minoritized communities, particularly Black faith communities, then understanding how these institutions and their leaders function may help enhance the vitality of these institutions. Researching HBTI leaders, purposed with leading institutions that train predominately Black students to lead Black faith-based and non-faith-based institutions, may provide helpful tools for administrators, staff, and students to impact America's religious and spiritual life.

Finally, this study will offer nuggets of wisdom and lessons on leadership through the authentic, inspiring, and courageous stories and insights from HBTI presidents. There is something to be gained from studying HBTI presidents. Not only will this study share their experiences as HBTI presidents. It will provide educational leaders and leaders with tools to examine themselves to expand their leadership capacity.

## Definition of Terms

This section will provide clarity on words, acronyms, and phrases used frequently throughout this study.

- *Graduate theological institutions* – an overarching phrase used to describe seminaries, theological schools, schools of religion, and schools of theology who confer graduate degrees of divinity and theology upon students upon graduation.
- *Historically Black Colleges or Universities (HBCU)* – an institution accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency, established before 1964, whose principal mission is for Black Americans' education (Title III, The Higher Education Act of 1965).
- *Historical Black Theological Institution (HBTI)* – a subset of HBCUs, accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency, established before 1964, whose principal mission is for Black Americans' theological education (Title III, The Higher Education Act of 1965).
- *Predominately White Institutions (PWI)* – an institution of higher learning in which White people account for 50% or more of the student enrollment (Brown & Dancy, 2010).
- *Predominately White Theological Institution (PWTI)* – an institution of graduate theological education in which White people account for 50% or more of the student enrollment (Brown & Dancy, 2010).

## Chapter Summary

Chapter One provided an overview of this project, which aims to understand HBTI presidents' experiences through the lens of critical spirituality. This chapter also identified the study's problem, purpose, research question, and significance. In Chapter Two, I engage literature pertinent to historically Black theological education and its

leadership. I begin by exploring literature detailing institutionalized theological education in the United States and the eventual emergence of HBTIs. Finally, I pivot to the literature on presidential leadership, critical spirituality, and its connection to institutionalized theological education. *Throughout this study, I sprinkle bits and pieces of my positionality. Often written in first-person narratives, my positionality is presented in italics to identify where I add my story to the study.*

# CHAPTER TWO

# LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is about presidential leadership in theological education – specifically critical spirituality and Black presidents' experiences at Historically Black Theological Institutions (HBTIs). Though HBTIs continue to graduate the most Black theologians in the world, their existence and influence are largely unknown (Albritton, 2012; Brown, 2013; Ricard, Brown & Foster, 2008). When recognized, HBTIs are often written about as antiquated, second-rate educational institutions full of enrollment, staffing, and leadership issues (Cherry, 1995; Felder, 2001; Ricard, Brown & Foster, 2008; Wheeler et al., 2006).

To reflect upon the experiences of Black presidents at HBTIs and their use of critical spirituality, this literature review will: (1) highlight the history of institutionalized theological education in the United States (U.S.); (2) survey literature on HBTIs founding, mission, significance, and challenges; (3) engage literature on Black men in higher education; (4) examine research on the experiences of presidents of U.S. based theological schools to include literature on Black and ethnic HBTI presidents, and (5) explore the literature on critical spirituality and its connection to presidential leadership in theological education. Emerging from this literature base is a platform to view Black presidents' professional role and their use of critical spirituality as they lead HBTIs.

## A Historical Prelude to Formal Theological Education

Before institutionalized theological education began in the U.S., nine of the nation's oldest colleges – Harvard College (now Harvard University), The College of

William and Mary, Yale University, the College of New Jersey (Princeton University), King's College (Columbia University), the College of Philadelphia (the University of Pennsylvania), the College of Rhode Island (Brown University), Queens College (Rutgers University), and Dartmouth College – functioned as theological training grounds for White men aspiring to become religious leaders and educators (Hoeveler, 2002; Rudolph, 1991). Known collectively as Colonial Colleges, these nine institutions were established throughout the thirteen newly formed U.S. colonies for the primary purpose of training White men to become faith leaders (Rudolph, 1991).

Leitch (1978) noted that Colonial Colleges were founded by all White Protestant Christian denominations – the Baptists, Puritans, Presbyterians, and the Church of England – desiring to train students for leadership positions in churches and society. In 1636, Harvard College, the first institution of higher education established in the U.S., was founded to "provide a learned ministry to the colonies" (*Harvard College Handbook for Students, 2019-2020*). In 1701, Puritan leaders founded Yale University, the third oldest higher education institution in the U.S., as a theocracy – a place governed and led by God – and a college to educate its future church and civic leaders (Schiff, 2018). The College of New Jersey, now Princeton University, was founded in 1746 by Presbyterian pastors to train students to lead churches within the colonies (Leitch, 1978). In addition to preparing students to become faith leaders, a body of literature analyzed Colonial Colleges' and their Christian founders' role in perpetuating the enslavement of people of African descent.

## Colonial College Founders and the Legacy of Slavery

Wilder (2013) and Patton (2016) critically engaged the link between Colonial Colleges, its Christian founders and leaders, and chattel slavery in the United States. Chattel slavery was a complex system of enslavement in the Americas, fueled by capitalism and racial oppression that treated people of African descent as property and sold them as mere commodities (Baker, 2018; Earl, 2003; Fielder, 2018; Linden & Garcia, 2016). Wilder's (2013) and Patton's (2016) studies provide a frame for understanding how the beginning of theological education arose within U.S. higher education institutions that perpetuated practices that upheld slavery and systemic oppression of Black people.

Patton (2016) problematized colonial colleges' role in producing and continuing racist thoughts and actions. Her view of U.S. higher education's underbelly expressed how Colonial Colleges operated as beacons of racism and oppression. Wilder (2013) examined the connection between Colonial Colleges, its founders, and the perpetuation of chattel slavery. He noted how the founders of Colonial Colleges came from families or were the families who made their fortunes from the institution of slavery and the products that resulted from enslaved people of African descent. His research not only connected Colonial Colleges and their founders to the perpetuation of slavery in the United States; his study connected Colonial Colleges with the seeds of institutionalized theological education. Thus, literature denotes that theological education began in an exclusive, oppressive, and racist milieu.

## The Beginning of Formal Theological Education in America

Theological education formally began in 1807 after a conflict between liberal and conservative leaders at Harvard. The conservative-leaning leaders withdrew from Harvard to create Andover Theological Seminary – the first higher education theological institution in the U.S. (Naylor, 1977). Andover is the first graduate school of any kind in North America (Andover Newton Theological Seminary, 2018; Naylor 1977). The school enrolled more theological students in its first academic year than any previously established U.S. higher education institution registered at one time (Naylor, 1977). Like its higher education predecessors, graduate theological education began as a place for White men to prepare for leadership roles in churches and educational institutions (Rowe, 1933). By 1840, more than 50 predominately White graduate schools for theological education had been created in 17 states and the District of Columbia by 13 Protestant denominations (Naylor 1977).

**Predominately White Theological Institutions (PWTIs) Connection of Slavery**

PWTIs that emerged before 1865, like their Colonial College forerunners, had a legacy steeped in discrimination and racism. Moorhead (2012) analyzed slavery, race, and gender at Princeton Seminary before the American Civil War. He concluded that Princeton Seminary, though they envisioned an end to slavery, "supported the continued colonization of free Blacks in Africa and fought immediate emancipation" of African people in America (p. 274). Princeton leaders believed, "A properly ordered society involved social subordination – of humanity to God, woman to man, children to parents, slaves to masters, and the morally unfit and uneducated to the best and brightest" (p. 274). Jones (2019) examined how Princeton Theological Seminary benefited financially

from the schools founding families who enslaved African people, profited significantly from the system of slavery, and invested in organizations that profited from and financed the expansion of the institution of slavery.

Flynn (2019) scrutinized the role Virginia Theological Seminary (VTS) played in its explicitly racist practices toward people of African descent. The study detailed how VTS was founded in 1823 by men who believed in and perpetuated the system of slavery – including Francis Scott Key, who wrote the Star-Spangled Banner and opposed emancipation. VTS did not accept Black students until 1953. Her examination of VTS highlighted the exclusionary stance VTS had toward Black people and Black students. This study's implications reach far beyond VTS to PWTIs, who sustained and benefited from the system of slavery.

### The Creation of the University-Based Theological Schools, the 1880s – 1980s

Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) quickly followed the creation of Andover Theological Seminary by creating graduate theological schools housed on their universities' campuses. In each instance, the university-based theological school structured its program like Andover's theological education program (Naylor, 1977). In *Hurrying Toward Zion: Universities, Divinity Schools, and American Protestantism,* Cherry (1995) provided an in-depth historical analysis of American Protestant university-based theological schools from the 1880s to the 1980s. Drawing most of the historical data from 11 Predominately White University-based theological schools, Cherry (1995) concluded that,

> Leaders of American Protestantism envisioned the university divinity school as the vanguard of a Christian movement destined to shape the culture of the nation. To join the mission of the church with the educational venture of the emerging modern American university was, in this vision, to move the cause of Protestant Christianity to the very core of the commanding values, ideas, and aspirations of the American people. The effort to create a learned ministry through alignments with the American university constituted one of this country's most notable educational endeavors. It also produced a history that has been largely neglected (p. ix).

Cherry's (1995) study identified how predominately White university-based seminaries began with a mission to shape America's moral compass with a predominately White, Christian lens.

## Graduate Theological Education, 1990's – Present

Graduate theological institutions are known interchangeably within the literature as seminaries, theological schools, and divinity schools. Despite the original intent of many colleges, universities, and theological schools to educate students to assume leadership in faith communities across the nation, training higher education students solely to take religious leadership positions has rapidly declined. In 2018, data from the Association of Theological Schools (ATS, 2018), the primary accrediting body for theological schools in the United States and Canada, indicated that the number of institutions dedicated solely to theological education is relatively small. According to the ATS (2018), there were 279 graduate theological institutions in North America. Data

from the same ATS report also suggested that theological schools offer multiple graduate degrees but find most of its students pursuing the Master of Divinity (M.Div.) degree. The M.Div. is the primary degree enabling students to assume ministerial leadership roles within local churches upon graduation.

## A Gap in Literature

Multiple studies note how graduate institutions for theological education quickly grew into vibrant educational centers for students who would eventually assume leadership roles as Christian pastors, educators, and even college presidents (Aleshire, Campbell, & Mannoia, 2006; Cherry, 1995; Naylor, 1977). While the studies conducted by Naylor (1977), Aleshire et al. (2006), Cherry (1995), and Leitch (1978) provide a useful frame for viewing institutionalized theological education historically, their research failed to provide a substantive exploration of historically Black theological education in the United States. Cherry's (1995) study provided some insight into Black students' historical experiences in theological education; however, the research focused significant attention on Black students' deficits at PWTIs and the overall lack of knowledge attained among Black faith leaders. Additionally, none of these studies provide insight into what it is like to lead an HBTI.

## Historically Black Theological Institutions (HBTIs)

The research focused on the history of HBTIs, its leadership, student body, and contribution to theological education is scarce. This section pieces together literature on the beginning of institutionalized Black theological education in the U.S., the missions of HBTIs, its connection to The Black Church, and its challenges. Emerging from this

diverse tapestry of literature is a more robust picture of HBTIs, which will help situate this study on Black presidents and their use of critical spirituality at HBTIs.

**The Formal Beginning of Black Theological Education**

Costen (2014) asserted that the founding of two Historically Black Colleges/Universities (HBCUs), Wilberforce University, and Ashmun Institute, now Lincoln University, in 1854, was the first time Black theological education in institutional form emerged in U.S higher education. He surmised that before 1854, the teaching of enslaved people of African descent was disjointed at best because training depended upon abolitionists or the benevolence of White people who enslaved people of African descent. Payne Theological Seminary (2018), which separated from Wilberforce University in 1891, is credited with being the first HBTI of any kind in the nation.

*Figure 1.1.* Fountain Hall, Morris Brown College, where Turner Theological Seminary began in 1894.

HBTIs are inextricably linked to HBCUs. HBCUs are defined as an institution accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency, established before 1964, whose principal mission is for Black Americans' education (Title III, The Higher Education Act of 1965). The U.S. Department of Education (1991) explained that HBCUs were established to serve Black people's educational needs when Black people were denied

admission into White institutions. Wheeler, Battle, and Maldonado (2006) and Gasman (2008) agreed that HBTIs existence, like HBCUs, are closely tied to the historical exclusion of Black people from attending Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) because of systemic racism and discriminative practices that permeated higher education. Wheeler et al. (2006) wrote, "The historical beginnings of most racial/ethnic theological seminaries are tied to a history of racism and segregation that did not allow people of color (especially African Americans) the opportunity to enroll in predominately White schools" (p. 195).

**The Mission in Historically Black Theological Education**

"*African Americans have been educated away from their own culture and traditions and have been attached to the fringes of European culture;*
*thus, dislocated from themselves, African Americans are taught to valorize European culture to the detriment of their own heritage*"

(Woodson, 1933, p. 7).

There are currently seven schools of theology in the U.S. that identify as Historically Black: Howard University School of Divinity, Samuel Dewitt Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union University, Shaw University Divinity School, The Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC), Hood Theological Seminary, Payne Theological Seminary, and Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary. Though situated in different contexts, HBTIs share a common missional thread focused on educating its students while honoring the history and heritage of people of African descent.

Founded in 1870, Howard University School of Divinity's mission is to "educate and form academic and religious leaders to serve the Church and society, and to celebrate the religious and cultural heritage of African-Americans, the African Diaspora, and Africa" (Howard University School of Divinity, 2019). The Samuel Dewitt Proctor School of Theology (STVU) at Virginia Union University asserts their institution is "Grounded in the rich traditions of African and African American religious life and culture" (Hylton, 2018). Payne Theological Seminary, the oldest freestanding HBTI in the nation, strives to "prepare leaders for ministry in the African American traditions of liberation, reconciliation, social justice, and the dignity of all humankind" (Payne Theological Seminary, 2018).


*Figure 2.1.* The Interdenominational Theological Center groundbreaking dedication, February 4, 1960.

Similarly, the Interdenominational Theological Center's (2019) mission is to be a "…Africentric ecumenical consortium of seminaries and fellowships that educate students to commit to practicing justice and peace through a liberating and transforming spirituality." Finally, Johnson C. Smith Seminary stressed its mission is "grounded in the scholarship and history of the African American religious experience," to provide "innovative theological education to advance communities of faith, justice, and compassion" (Johnson C. Smith Seminary, 2018). The missions of each HBTI suggest a connection to the cultural and intellectual heritage of Black and African peoples.

While there are similarities between the seven HBTIs, it must not be assumed that each institution operates in a similar fashion or lives into their understanding of Afrocentric or African in the same way. To this fact, Garibaldi (1991) acknowledged: "Black colleges are not monolithic" (p. 6). HBTIs exist in different locations, report to specific denominational bodies, and have a wealth of diversity that makes them unique. Though a small percentage of the educational landscape, literature situates these institutions as significant schools of training for minoritized populations, especially Black people, desiring to pursue theological education.

**The Significance of HBTIs**

Black theologians Wilmore (1987) and Beach (1986) conducted studies on Black people's experiences at PWTIs. In each instance, their research described how Black people experience PWTIs as places that often excludes the narratives, images, and experiences of Black people and other minoritized communities. Wilmore (1987) offered a critical analysis of theological education for its leadership, curriculum, and engagement

style based upon a model developed by White people for White people. According to Wilmore (1987), most theological schools,

> "Determine their curricula and institutional priorities according to the needs of the churches that are composed primarily of the middle-aged, middle-class, White descendants of Western European people who live, for the most part, in predominantly White nuclear family-centered, city residential, suburban or small-town communities" (p. 150).


*Figure 2.2.* The groundbreaking for Hood Theological Seminary, Feb 10, 1960.

His analysis underscored how educational models of this nature strip minoritized communities of the opportunity to engage their cultural heritage adequately. On the other hand, it infuses a model of education that leaves Black people unprepared for leadership within Black churches and communities. Beach (1986) reflected upon 40 years of membership on the faculty of a university-based PWTI in the Southeastern part of the

United States. Beach (1986) explained that Black students who attend PWTIs regularly leave with feelings of being "white-washed…and graduate ill--equipped for the style of ministry expected of them (p. 12)."

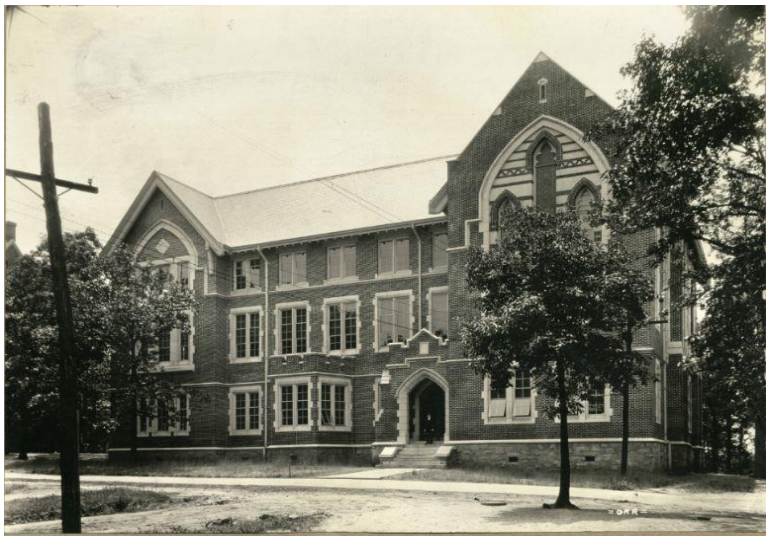

*Figure 3.1.* Thirkield Hall, Gammon Theological Seminary, circa 1920.

Literature suggests that HBTIs exist, in part, to combat this approach to education for minoritized communities. In a study on the impact of The Interdenominational Theological Center, Oswald Bronson, former President of The Interdenominational Theological Center, articulated the dual challenge and significance of HBTIs through an analogy used by Van Dusen (2018), who wrote:

> The significance of this [HBTI] is very vivid... If an atomic bomb destroyed [a PWTI], it would not destroy theological education. It would be very tragic, but it would not destroy theological education. Those [prospective students] would go on elsewhere, and theological education would continue…If a catastrophe were to destroy a [Black seminary], it would be absolutely irrevocable and irreparable. There would be no other school to pick up and carry on the education of [Black] ministers.

Though a crude analogy, the words uncover a theme of HBTIs being centers of learning dedicated to serving Black people's needs and positively affecting Black people's ability to thrive (Costen, 1984).

**The Black Church**

"The Black Church is where people of color gather to embrace and launch a frontal attack on the realities that negate their being and their person."

(Clark, 1965, p. 62)

In 2018, The In Trust Center for Theological Schools hosted a gathering of presidents and deans from the nation's HBTIs to discuss Black theological education's significance. Kinney (2018), the keynote speaker, and former Dean of The Samuel Dewitt Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union University linked Clark's (1965) explanation of The Black Church to his address, "The Gift of Black Theological Education." In that speech, Kinney said,

> "If ever we needed black seminaries, it is now. Black seminaries are where we find the strength not to run, not to stink, and not to surrender, not to implode or explode, but to run on just a little while longer, believing in a future that is not defined, determined, or destined by the toxicity of our communities, but by the power of grace, and the continued investment of an amazing God who has brought us safe thus far" (Kinney, 2018).

His words showed the connection between The Black Church and the HBTI. HBTIs are linked to The Black Church. The Black Church was first articulated by Carter G. Woodson (1921) as The Negro Church. The Black Church is an assortment of

denominations, people, and faith-based organizations who have an overarching bend towards justice (though there are discrepancies about what types of justice is chosen), equity, hope, and the perseverance of Black people (Lewis & Weems, 2008; Walton, 2008; Woodson, 1921). The Black Church is a dynamic community of people, not a physical location. Despite a national legacy steeped in slavery and a society that remains defined by race and class (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), The Black Church in America has worked to provide some measure of safe space for Black people, and other marginalized people to voice their concerns, seek spiritual guidance, and fight for justice.

The Black Church is more than a place for worship and theological debate. It is a place to find hope and to engage the challenges faced by marginalized people and communities. Walton (2008) described The Black Church as a place where people can speak out against injustice, seek refuge, and find hope for a better tomorrow.

In a study on student loan debt among HBTI students, I used Lincoln and Mamiya's (1990) research to link HBTIs with The Black Church (Creasman, 2011). I cite that study here to show the connection between The Black Church and historically Black theological education. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) contended that The Black Church, while still a vital institution within the Black community, struggles to address Black people's needs and aspirations (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) offered one recommendation for policymakers, HBTI leaders, and Black churches: help prepare more academically trained Black clergy. Ultimately, Creasman (2011) used Lincoln and Mamiya's (1990) research to show the inextricable link between The Black Church and the Black seminary.

## HBTI Challenges

The literature identified several challenges faced by HBTIs. I broadly categorize those challenges into four categories: (1) second class citizenry; (2) institutional isolation; (3) the need, if any, for theological education; and (4) seeing survival as successful. What follows is a compilation of research identifying the challenges literature references when concentrating on HBTIs.

### Second Class Syndrome and the Stigma of Inferiority

Leaders of HBTIs must grapple with the stereotype of being seen and understood as second-class institutions. Wheeler et al. (2006) wrote, "[HBTI leaders] may have to contend with a history of isolation and the presumption that the institution itself is 'second class' because it is racial/ethnic" (p. 195). Recognizing racism is still prevalent in the U.S., Wheeler et al. (2006) contend that despite the historical reasons for the development of HBTIs, HBTI presidents must overcome the racial stigma that HBTIs are inherently inferior, even among some theological schools in the United States. The study suggested that HBTI presidents countered narratives of institutional deficiency. A critical point not addressed within their research was how HBTI leaders effectively combat the assumptions of being a second class institution.

### Institutional Isolation

Brown (2013), Wheeler et al. (2006), and Mays (1978) concluded that HBTIs must work to overcome a sense of isolation due to being recognized as second-rate, predominately Black theological institutions. Wheeler et al.'s (2006) contended that HBTIs are often physically isolated to communities filled with blight and intellectually

isolated by an assumption of institutional deficiency. Recognizing these challenges, Wheeler et al. (2006) ask how HBTIs overcome a sense of isolation from a history of exclusion due to thoughts around race and class? Within this subsection of literature on HBTIs are researchers who wrestled with understanding why HBTIs and HBCUs must continually argue for its relevance within U.S. higher education (Mays, 1978; Brown, 2013; West, 2008).

**Is There a Need for Theological Education?**

Creasman (2011) examined the experiences of HBTI students pursuing graduate theological education at an HBTI. That study, the focused on students, revealed a considerable tension between Black churches and their thoughts about the need for formalized theological training. Part of the struggle hinged on a belief that an individual's "calling" prepared them for leadership in Black churches, not formalized theological education (Earl, 2003).

**Moving Beyond Survival as Successful**

Earl (2003) wrote a reflective essay based upon his experiences of being a longtime professor at an HBTI. That essay utilized Franklin's (2007) research on the challenges prevalent in Black communities and the need for people and organizations to restore hope in the Black community. In that work, Earl (2003) argued that the lack of resources among HBCUs and HBTIs and the high amount of student loan debt amassed by HBCU and HBTI students raise difficult questions for leaders at historically Black educational institutions.

Franklin (2007) conducted a study on the challenges faced by Black people and communities in the 21st century. He urged the Black community and historically Black institutions to reflect on their lack of engagement with HBCUs. Earl (2003) further suggested that Black people and institutions' lack of investment in HBCUs has created a culture where HBCUs have viewed survival as successful. To be clear, success for many Black people has hinged on an ability to survive the mayhem of enslavement, Jim and Jane Crow, mass incarceration, police brutality, and struggle in so many ways. However, Earl (2003) contended that this "survival as success ethic" – the idea that merely surviving is successful – has caused many HBCUs' significant challenges. Finally, the study recommended that HBTIs move beyond a survivalist mentality to an excellence only mentality by (1) finding ways to mitigate the need to be solely tuition-driven, (2) increasing alumni engagement; and (3) investing in current students holistic success.

## Black Men in the Academy

A significant assumption made within this study was that most HBTI presidents identified as Black men. When exploring the literature on HBTIs and their presidents, that assumption appeared to be true: most HBTI presidents identified as Black men. In addition to there being a gap in the literature on the experiences of HBTI presidents who identified as Black and male, it also became painfully clear that a limited number of studies focused on narratives of success, resiliency, and hope among Black men in higher education in general. Harper (2009) wrote:

> Anyone who takes time to read about [Black men] could confidently conclude that Black males are troubled, their future is bleak, they all do poorly, and there is

> little that can be done to reverse longstanding outcomes disparities that render them among the least likely to succeed in college (p. 699).

In another study, Harper and Davis (2012) highlighted how images of Black men in America are frequently confined to environments shaped by drugs, crime, prison, athletics, and academic failure. Harper and Davis suggested that these less than favorable images of Black men make it more difficult for Black male students and administrators to experience academic and professional success. Finally, they provide counternarratives to the idea that Black men do not care about their education and professional life in higher education.

Fries-Britt (1997) examined the support structures and resources available to Black male students and higher education administrators. Like Harper and Davis (2012), Fries-Britt explained how higher education administrators, faculty, and staff focused more on Black men's unfavorable images than the inspiring stories of Black male success in the academy. He wrote, "In education, we have contributed to this negative portrait by the disproportionate amount of research that emphasizes remediation and disadvantage" for Black men in education (Fries-Britt, 1997, p. 65).

A snapshot of the literature on Black men in the academy showed that the percentage of Black men enrolled in post-secondary education has not improved in more than thirty years (Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Harper, 2006). The persistence rate among Black men pursuing education remains the lowest among all racial and ethnic groups (Harper, 2012; Reynolds, Howard, & Jones, 2013). Black men matriculating at schools with marginal numbers of professors of color leave with feelings of intellectual

and professional inferiority (Snipes, 2016), have consistently low rates of baccalaureate degree attainment (Dancy & Brown, 2008; Harper, 2006a, 2012; Strayhorn, 2010), and are often seen as unprepared for the rigors of college-level coursework (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009). Unfortunately, these less than favorable images and statistics of Black men in higher education have caused some educators to develop "unsubstantiated, unquestioned, and inaccurate thoughts and beliefs about Black males; put simply, these thoughts can be harmful and quite detrimental" (Milner, 2007, p. 245).

Inversely, in *Black Men in the Academy: Narratives of Resiliency, Achievement, and Success*, McGowan, Palmer, Wood, and Hibbler, Jr. (2015) used Harper's (2012) anti-deficit model to recast an image of Black male success in higher education. McGowan et al. (2015) explained that "Harper's anti-deficit model emphasizes the importance of focusing on aspects that are working to *encourage* Black male success compared to aspects that are *limiting* their advancement" (p. xi). In that study, McGowan et al. (2015) highlighted the narratives of 14 Black men – administrators, students, and faculty – who excelled, overcame obstacles, and preserved in their higher education journey.

## Presidential Leadership in Theological Education

The previous sections highlighted the history of theological education, the beginning of HBTIs, the missions of HBTIs, the challenges faced by HBTIs, and Black men's experiences in the academy. This section pivots to explore literature focused on presidential leadership in theological education, especially the administration of HBTIs.

The final section will analyze the critical spirituality framework and literature dedicated to critical spirituality.

**Where are the studies on HBTIs?**

Wheeler et al. (2006) conducted a study on the experiences of minoritized seminary presidents serving at HBTIs and PWTIs. Their work highlighted the challenges of being a Black president of an HBTI. One of the difficulties highlighted was a need to deal with being seen as a second class institution. Additionally, their study investigated how Black presidents at HBTIs grapple with a cloud of suspicion for being Black leaders; and how Black presidents within HBTIs carry the weight of being the exemplar of Black theological excellence for an entire community of people. Beyond this brief study, the literature on the role and experiences of HBTI presidents is lacking. Despite this reality, this section details the major themes within the literature on presidents of theological schools.

**Themes within Presidential Leadership Literature**

Lewis and Weems (2006) edited one of the most comprehensive studies on presidential leadership at graduate schools for theological education. Their study problematizes the lack of literature dedicated to the role of the president at theological schools. They argued that the void of literature on theological school presidents creates significant challenges for current seminary presidents desiring resources to help them lead more effectively. Sharing the wisdom and experiences of more than 40 theological school presidents from around the U.S. and Canada, the study identified the demands, challenges, opportunities, stresses, and joys of being a seminary president. Despite their

40 theological school president analysis, their research focuses little attention on HBTIs and their presidents.

**A Calling**

A common theme within the literature on theological school presidents is the viewing of the presidency as a vocation, a "calling," not a job (Aleshire, Campbell, & Mannoia, 2006; Fenhagen, 1996; Lewis and Weems, 2006; Oldenburgm 1996; Shriver, 1996; Warford 1996; Zikmund, 1996). This body of literature described a "calling" as something mystical and otherworldly. Despite being called by institutional governing boards to the position of president, the calling for seminary presidents is personal. Seminary presidents often feel called by some entity more significant than themselves to share their care for others.

Lewis and Weems (2006) described the call to presidential leadership as a calling like Samuel's biblical call narrative. Samuel, an assistant to a significant priest, is awakened three times from his sleep by a voice calling his name. Twice, Samuel awakens and rushes to the priest's bedside. Each time, the priest assures him that he did not summons him. The priest instructs Samuel to go back to sleep and respond directly to the voice if he heard it again. Samuel goes to sleep and, again, hears that voice. Finally, he answers. The voice calls Samuel to serve the people in his community and to call out injustice. This type of call is a calling by something greater than oneself – that Lewis and Weems (2006) reference when writing on being called to the seminary presidency. Aleshire et al. (2006) described a president's calling as a call to action and a call to engage the challenges and opportunities of theological education.

## A Challenge

Several studies cited the demands of being a seminary president (Aleshire et al., 2006; Gillespie, 2004; Lewis & Weems, 2006; McCarter, 1994). Those studies described presidential leadership as problematic because of the seemingly endless responsibility of finding and managing the necessary resources, dealing with difficult personnel, navigating the sometimes complex terrain of academic governance, and attending thoughtfully to multiple constituencies (Aleshire et al., 2006). A seminary president must grapple with a widening range of responsibilities while dealing with the complexity of its many roles.

Gillespie (2004) described being a seminary president as a novice chess player struggling to understand the game's pieces and moves. His insights are not unfounded, considering the roles identified by the literature for seminary presidents. Several scholars described seminary presidents as counselors, administrators, leaders, pastors, public speakers, social justice fighters, faculty and staff advocates, professors, pilgrims, and theologians (McCarter, 1994; Lewis and Weems, 2006; Gillespie, 2004). Undoubtedly, the numerous titles referring to seminary presidents show how the seminary president's role has many nuances.

## Keys to the Success of Theological Institutions

Researchers agree that presidents of theological institutions are vital to the success of theological institutions. Lewis and Weems (2006) described seminary presidents as individuals who stand at the seminary center point. They are administrators who are on "the hot seat of a daily struggle to understand and fulfill the seminary's

mission while maintaining its economic vitality" (Lewis & Weems, 2006, p. xi). Fenhagen (1996) described the seminary president as a community builder, administrator, activist, and dreamer who continually strives to pull the institution and its people toward a daring vision.

**Mentoring.** Mentoring relationships are not expounded upon in literature on HBTIs and graduate schools for theological education. However, Adida, Lake, Shafiei, & Platt (2020) and Briscoe & Freeman (2019) conducted studies on the mentoring relationships on HBTI presidents. In each instance, Adida et al. (2020) and Brisco & Freeman (2019) articulated the positive influence mentorship has on HBCU presidents. HBTIs are a subset of HBCUs, which makes this literature pertinent to this study on HBTI presidents.

## Spirituality

Despite the various challenges and themes that arise within leading theological institutions, Lewis and Weems (2006) noted that spirituality is a centerpiece for presidential success at theological schools. They wrote:

> There is a hard to define, almost mysterious, dimension of presidential leadership [of a theological school]…Who the president is personally and how he or she functions, even in small matters, deeply influence how others in the institution perceive what is possible for the organization. It is more than knowledge and skill. It is "persona" – the depth of a person, one's spirituality, one's interaction with others…A president [of a theological school] can manage an institution with

> specific knowledge and skills; but without this more elusive dimension of leadership, success is unlikely (p. xii).

This study intends to look at this hard to define quality among Black presidential leadership at HBTIs through the lens of critical spirituality.

**Critical Spirituality as a Critical Framework**

This research's central assumption is that Black HBTI presidents use spirituality to inform their work as HBTI leaders to address challenges, lead the institution, and uplift the people within predominately Black theological schools. Dantley's (2005) critical spirituality framework emphasizes critical theory and African American prophetic spirituality. It aims to inform and expand educational administrators' leadership capabilities to effect change within their educational environments.

Educational institutions need transformative, authentic, creative, and adaptive leaders who can navigate the rapid and unprecedented rate of change in American higher education (Hendrickson, Lane, Harris, & Dorman, 2013; Marion & Gonzales, 2014). However, higher education institutions in the U.S. must grapple with its traditional, top-down leadership (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012). Historically, within U.S. higher education settings, presidents, chancellors, or executive leadership teams comprising the president and senior administrative officers, create plans and communicate those plans to deans. Deans then translate the information disseminated by the people at the top of the hierarchy to the workers at the lower rungs of the scale to achieve academic success (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012).

Leadership theories such as traditional or heroic leadership (Kezar, 2001), bureaucratic leadership (Weber, 1947), management of influence leadership (McCall & Lombardo, 1983; Stogdill, 1948), and influential leadership (Marion & Gonzales, 2004) approach leadership from this hierarchical, often very traditional, White male, perspective. Leadership theories of this nature often silence, or at best, marginalize the voices of colorful people. Because this study focuses on Black presidents' experiences at HBTIs, I desire to utilize critical leadership theories that include historically underrepresented and marginalized groups' voices and perspectives. One critical leadership theory that informs this study is critical spirituality (Dantley, 2005).

## Critical Spirituality Framework

Dantley (2005) described critical spirituality as an amalgamation of critical theory and themes within African American prophetic spirituality to help educational leaders improve themselves and the higher education institutions they serve. Though he does not fully define his concept of African American prophetic spirituality, he does connect his understanding of African American prophetic spirituality to Cornel West's (1999) research on the subject. To capture a glimpse of the Black prophetic figure and the spirituality that undergirds them, West (2015) wrote:

> "Black prophetic figures are connected to collective efforts to overcome injustice…Even as distinct individuals, they are driven by a we-consciousness that is concerned with the needs of others. More importantly, they are willing to renounce petty pleasures and accept awesome burdens. Tremendous sacrifice and

> painful loneliness sit at the center of who they are and what they do. Yet we are deeply indebted to who they were and what they did" (West, 2015, p. 2).

Dantley (2005) uses this idea as a foundation within his critical spirituality framework. Critical spirituality involves critical self-reflection, deconstructive interpretation, performative creativity, and transformative action. Ultimately, this leadership framework challenges educational leaders to begin by reflecting on the depth of their identities. Second, the framework engages the leader in deconstructing parts of their identity that oppress or silence others. Third, critical spirituality explores how leaders can create more just and diverse organizations. Finally, Dantley (2005) recommends leaders incorporate the first three steps of the framework to transform the institutions they serve.

### Critique of Critical Spirituality

Dantley (2005) argued that critical spirituality is an excellent leadership theory for principals within primary education contexts. To his point, most studies have used critical spirituality as a framework within primary educational settings (Dantley, 2003; 2010; McCray, Beachum, & Yawn, 2012; Scanlan, 2011). Nonetheless, this study will show how presidents of higher education institutions can use critical spirituality within their educational contexts? Second, though Dantley (2005) utilizes the African American prophetic tradition to enhance administrative leadership, he does not include any Black theologians' voices – people who may meet the criteria for being a prophetic Black leader. In this sense, Black theologians serving as leaders of HBTIs may expand the literature base on the critical spirituality framework.

## Why Should We Study HBTIs?

Though an admittedly small segment of the higher education population in the U.S., HBTIs ultimately work to positively affect the quality and depth of religious life, and life in general, for all people, not just Black people. The primary institutions that affect religious and spiritual life for people in the U.S. are the many diverse faith communities (churches, mosques, synagogues) led by faith/religious leaders (Wheeler, Battle, & Maldonado, 2006). Lewis and Weems (2006) contended that "by a conservative estimate, a religious leader who spends thirty years of their professional life as a religious leader will likely touch and variously influence 100,000 individuals and numerous community groups" (p. xiv). Simply put, no other educational venue has such a direct impact on the nation's religious and spiritual life.

HBTIs are a critical link in the chain of preparing and developing leaders for service to the world – especially leaders who are perceptive and aware of the plight of minoritized communities (Lewis & Weems, 2006). HBTIs and its leaders are worth studying. I believe HBTIs possess qualities that will teach leaders throughout the organizational chart how to expand their leadership capacity, call out injustice, persevere despite challenges, dream, creatively solve problems, take action, and trust the guidance of an energy greater than themselves.

Researching HBTIs, purposed to train students to lead faith-based and non-faith-based institutions, will positively impact administrators, staff, and students to impact religious life throughout the world. That is why this study matters. Not only will it expand the literature on HBTIs and its leadership, but this study will also provide tools

for leaders who are ready to reflect open their actions to transform institutions and communities.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter has explored literature on the beginning of U.S. based theological education, the history, mission, significance, and challenges of HBTIs, presidential leadership in graduate theological education, and critical spirituality. Consistent within the literature is the limited research dedicated to the experiences of Black presidents at HBTIs. The literature also discussed the need for HBTIs. This chapter also touched upon the importance of HBTIs, as they endeavor to liberate the minds and bodies of minoritized people and communities. This study adds to the void of research on HBTIs and their leadership and offers readers. In Chapter Three, I pivot to detail the research design for this project.

# CHAPTER THREE

# RESEARCH DESIGN

"Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose" (Hurston, 1942, p. 182). Chapter three provides the frame for such formalized curiosity by describing the research design for this study on Black presidents at HBTIs. First, I restate the problem, purpose, and research question undergirding this project. After that, I present this chapter in five sections: (1) epistemology, (2) theoretical and analytical framework, (3) methodology, (4) methods, and (5) positionality.

## Restatement of the Problem and Purpose

"Black theological education is one of the most significant and

unheralded stories in all of higher education"

(Pollard, 2008, p. 3).

Dean Alton B. Pollard III spoke the words above in his 2008 inaugural address as the new Dean of Howard University Divinity School. His words captured a snapshot of the overarching problems within research on HBTIs and their leaders. A review of the literature on HBTIs in general, and Black HBTI presidents specifically, pointed to three explicit issues highlighted in the previous chapter. First, there was a void of literature detailing the experiences, challenges, and successes of Black presidents of HBTIs (Costen, 2014; Lincoln & Mamiya; 1990; Pollard, 2008). Second, much of the research on HBTIs focused on narratives of scarcity and deficiency among HBTIs and their leaders (Beach, 1986; Cherry, 1995; Wilmore, 1987). Literature of this nature detracts from the richness of HBTIs and their leadership. Finally, limited research focused on

critical spirituality (Dantley, 2005) within higher education administrators' leadership practices. Despite HBTIs success in graduating the most Black theologians globally, few people know about their existence (Albritton, 2012; Brown, 2013; Ricard, Brown, & Foster, 2008).

## Purpose of the Study

This phenomenological study aimed to reflect upon Black presidents' experiences at HBTIs and their use of critical spirituality (Dantley, 2005). Ultimately, I wanted to understand how HBTI presidents overcame personal and professional obstacles, challenge assumptions of institutional inferiority and deficiency, and engage in the struggle for physical and psychological freedom for HBTI constituents and the communities they serve.

## Research Question

One foundational question guided this exploration of critical spirituality and the experience of Black HBTI presidents:

1. How do Black presidents engage critical spirituality in their leadership of HBTIs?

## Philosophical and Epistemological Grounding

"To sing about freedom and to pray for its coming is not enough. Freedom must be actualized in history by oppressed peoples who accept the intellectual challenge to analyze the world for the purpose of changing it."

(Cone, 2011, p. 57)

Holcomb (2010) wrote, “The epistemology of the minority consists of theories of knowledge created by members, about members’ modes of knowing, for the purpose of liberating members” (p. 471). Similarly, in the caption above, Cone (1980) described minoritized peoples’ need to create theories that enable freedom for minoritized people and communities. Cone is the creator of Black liberation theology, a robust theological framework designed to help Black people overcome oppressive systems and push back against narratives that negated their being. In this light, I used social constructionism and Black epistemology perspectives to ungird this study.

**Social Constructionism**

Social constructionism affirms that knowledge and meaning are created in relationship with people (Lock & Strong, 2010; Parker 1998). Social cultures often influence “the collective generation of meaning” (Crotty, 1998, p. 58) in social constructionism. While HBTI presidents develop meaning based on their own experiences, they function within academic communities. Academic communities are social spaces where knowledge and meaning-making are often co-constructed and shared across the learning community’s breadth.

Social constructionism also supports the idea that knowledge and meaning can vary depending upon the time and place a phenomenon was experienced (Lock & Strong, 2010). For instance, differences in interpretation may emerge when analyzing the experiences of a current HBTI president and an HBTI president who led the same institution 50 years before. Social constructionism is an anti-essentialist epistemology

that recognizes people as "self-defining and socially constructed participants" (Lock & Smith, 2010, p. 7).

**Black Epistemology**

Black epistemology is elusive within the literature. Nonetheless, Black epistemological perspectives were vital for this study. Four scholars (Gordon, 1990; Hossein, 2019; Vaughn, 2019; West, 2015) informed my use of Black epistemology. Gordon (1990) affirmed the necessity of Black epistemology for educational theory and practice. Vaughn (2019) argued that Black epistemologies, though historically marginalized, can be used to challenge assumptions of U.S. citizenship. Hossein (2019) used Black epistemology to expand research in the field of economics. Taken together, these scholars provide five concepts central to Black epistemology.

- Black people are valid knowers and creators of knowledge.
- Knowledge generated by Black people can counter the narratives used to interpret and control the experiences of minoritized people.
- Celebrates a "we-centered-consciousness" over an "I-centered-consciousness."
- Knowledge is anti-essentialist.
- Black epistemology emphasizes hope, progress, and uplift for people.

First, Black epistemology celebrates the voices, experiences, and perspectives of Black people. It is an interdisciplinary frame locating Black people's knowledge, Black histories, and Black experiences (Gordon, 1990; Hossein, 2019; Vaughn, 2019). Black epistemology affirms that "Black people are valid knowers and creators of

knowledge…This shift empowers Black agents to solve community problems, to contribute to social change, and to advance human freedom" (Vaughn, 2019, p. 4). Gordon (1990) described Black epistemology as an epistemology that "takes the actual experiences of the [Black] community as its starting point" (p. 89).

Second, Black epistemology critiques dominant narratives and paradigms used to "interpret, understand, and control Black people" (Gordon, 1990, p. 91). Black epistemology does this by celebrating the knowledge and scholarship generated by Black people. Gordon (1990) and Vaughn (2019) argued that Black people's scholarship had not been fully engaged beyond historically marginalized communities. Black epistemology draws from the well of Black thought and life. It acknowledges that Black people produce knowledge that is beneficial for all society, not just Black people.

Third, Black epistemology celebrates a "we-centered-consciousness" over an "I-centered-consciousness." West (2015) asserted that "Black people once had a strong tradition of lifting every voice" (p. 1). This lifting ever voice was a collective voice striving towards the liberation of minoritized communities.

Fourth, Black epistemology recognizes the diversity of truth within the experiences of Black people. Black epistemology is an anti-essentialist epistemology. Gordon (1990) asserted, "the generation of knowledge in literature, music, and history produced by [Black people] has powerful pedagogical implications" for study in any field. Black epistemology recognizes that one person's lived experience does not encapsulate every person's lived experience in the world. Finally, Black epistemology emphasizes the betterment, hope, and progress of people (Hossein, 2019; Vaughn, 2019).

Using social constructionism and Black epistemology created space for multiple truths to emerge with this study. The use of both epistemologies undergirded the idea that Black presidents of HBTIs experienced the social world as people who were often marginalized or silenced (Gordon, 1990). However, HBTI president's experiences were not uniform. Social constructionism and Black epistemological perspectives helped the researcher grasp how HBTI presidents' experiences are influenced by their connection to race, gender, and social class issues.

## Theoretical Framework – Critical Spirituality

Dantley (2005) described critical spirituality as an amalgamation of critical theory and themes within African American prophetic spirituality to help educational leaders improve themselves and the higher education institutions they serve. Though Dantley (2005) did not fully articulate his notion of critical theory or African American prophetic spirituality, his foundational argument was that critical spirituality worked to create transformative change within administrative leaders and the higher education institutions they serve. As such, Dantley's (2005) theory of critical spirituality was appropriate to explore the experiences of Black presidents at HBTI's.

Dantley (2005) defined spirituality as "that influential part of humankind that allows us to make meaning of our lives. It is what compels us to make human connections, and it provides for us our sense of ontology and teleology, our sense of being and purpose for being" (pp. 501-502). Applying critical spirituality to educational leadership, Dantley (2010) wrote, "…transformative leaders are those who allow their spiritual selves to assist them in the execution of their leadership responsibilities" (p.

215). In this sense, critical spirituality explores how leaders' conception of spirituality informs their identity and is expressed outwardly within the organizations they serve (Boyd, 2012).

Dantley (2003) developed four themes within critical spirituality: critical self-reflection, deconstructive interpretation, performative creativity, and transformative action. As seen in Figure 1.1, critical spirituality begins with educational leaders reflecting upon their identity. Eventually, the framework culminates in examining leaders' efforts as they work to transform educational institutions. For critical spirituality to be effective, educational leaders must engage each step chronologically. Leaders cannot fully deconstruct interpretations (the second theme in critical spirituality) until they first understand their own identity through critical self-reflection. For Dantley (2005), only after reflecting upon one's identity and working to destruct narratives that diminish people and organizations can leaders engage the final two critical spirituality steps.

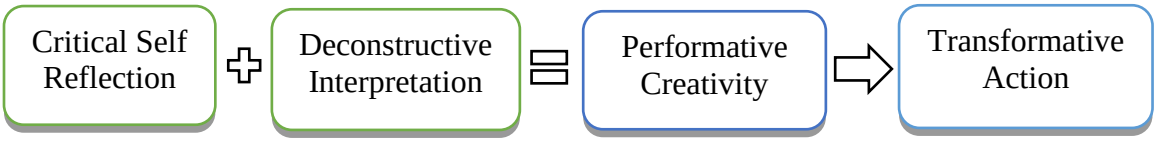


*Figure 4.1* Critical Spirituality Framework.

**Critical Self Reflection**

Dantley (2010) described critical self-reflection as "the process whereby practicing and prospective educational leaders come to an understanding of themselves. Dantley's first theme involves the educational leader coming to grips with [their] sacred, genuine, or untarnished self" (p. 216). Recognizing that identity is complex, dynamic,

and fluid, critical self-reflection moves leaders to embrace themselves completely. Critical self-reflection challenges educational leaders to take an introspective look at themselves to understand their nuanced identity.

In addition to an introspective look at one's identity, critical self-reflection stresses the importance of educational leaders engaging their personal and social identities within the context of their social, political, professional, and economic realities (Boyd, 2012; Dantley, 2005). At the end of each day, Dantley (2005) suggested that educational leaders reflect on their decision-making processes by asking themselves: "Whose interests are being served by the decision(s) I have made? Does this decision silence discourse or encourage it? Are people's lives positively affected by this decision?" (p. 664). And, "how many times was the question 'Whose interests were being served' was not, but needed to be answered" (Dantley, 2005, p. 507). Critical self-reflection causes leaders to grapple with interrogating their own "elitist attitudes or predispositions grounded in notions of marginalizing the other" (Dantley, 2005, p. 507). Critical self-reflection is not an opportunity to express how successful an individual is. It calls for the administrator to analyze their choices against the backdrop of the people they serve.

**Deconstructive Interpretation**

Deconstructive interpretation is the way that leaders "apply a critical theoretical perspective to the ways in which they have been socialized as well as to the ways the socialization process operates through major institutions of the American society" (Dantley, 2009, p. 51). This type of analysis requires courageous and active participation

to remove what is not working to prepare the foundation for something better. Deconstructive interpretation requires leaders to deconstruct any habits, actions, or ideas that do not help people flourish. As a result, this theme first needs leaders to reflect upon who they are as individuals and leaders.

**Performative Creativity**

Performative creativity emphasizes the "development of pedagogical and leadership practices that move the school and the learning community from maintaining the status quo to envisioning a more democratic culture and space where the legitimation of voices of difference can take place" (Dantley, 2010, p. 217). This stage calls for a radical critique of existing educational structures (Dantley, 2005). Performative creativity requires academic leaders to move beyond traditional leadership frameworks that often silence or, at best, marginalizes the voices and perspectives of people who work at the lowest rungs of institutions. It compels leaders to challenge what has been considered truth to "design new approaches that empower economically and socially marginalized students to participate in learning that affirms their identities and directly speaks to their social situations" (Boyd, 2012).

**Transformative Action**

Transformative action is the final step of critical spirituality. It shows how leaders actively engage their institutions and communities to bring about positive change. Transformative action uncovers "the many ways in which communities foster undemocratic practices and injustice and literally causes those issues to become matters of academic inquiry and exploration" (Dantley, 2010, p. 217). It also shows how

institutional leaders work to transform the organizations and the people connected to it. Transformative action is intimately connected to performative creativity. Educational leaders must continually and creatively engage the institutions and communities they represent. Transformative action requires the administrative leader to combine each step of critical spirituality to transform themselves and the institutions they serve.

## Analytical Frameworks

This study used critical spirituality (Dantley, 2005) and African American spirituality (Bridges, 2001) to analyze HBTI presidents' experiences. Dantley (2005) did not fully articulate what African American prophetic spirituality is within his critical spirituality framework. However, Dantley (2005) credited Bridges' (2001) African American spirituality framework with helping him develop critical spirituality. As a result, this study utilized Bridges (2001) African American spirituality framework in conjunction with critical spirituality (Dantley, 2005) to analyze the spiritual and religious experiences of Black HBTI presidents.

### African American Spirituality

Black people have a long history of acknowledging their spirituality and connection to a higher power as they engage in the struggle for physical, communal, and psychological freedom (Bridges, 2001; Dantley, 2009; McCray, Beachum, & Yawn, 2013). African American spirituality connects spirituality to Black people's historical ability to dream and persevere despite systematic oppression (Chandler, 2017; Newlin et al., 2002). Though African American spirituality has a rich history, Chandler (2017)

argued contexts beyond communities of color rarely explore its significance and contribution to society.

Newlin et al. (2002) asserted that spirituality is a prominent reality within Black culture, as it permeates nearly every personal and professional life experience of many Black people. Newlin et al. (2002) expounded upon the connection between spirituality and people of African descent. They wrote:

> "Historically, spirituality has served as a personal and communal source of liberation, solace, hope, meaning, and forgiveness, particularly in relationship to social, political, and economic injustices. Further, spirituality has fostered political mobilization, action, and participation. It has shaped individual, family, and communal relationships, promoting altruism and unity. Spirituality also has influenced African-American aesthetic expression through music, art, and literature. Moreover, spirituality, or the religious practice in which it is expressed, has been shown to distinctly influence African-American health beliefs, practices, and outcomes" (Newlin et al., 2002, p. 58).

Bridges (2001) described African American spirituality in two ways. First, she wrote, "African American spirituality gave Black people the ability to transcend the limitations imposed by racism (p. 166)." Second, she defined African American spirituality as "the triumph of good – as it is occasioned by purpose and forgiveness – in the face of overwhelming evil" (Bridges, 2001, p. 166). This study employed themes within Bridges (2001) African American spirituality framework. Those themes were:

1) A Unified Worldview

2) Black Peoples Self -Definition of Human Identity

3) Spirituality Embodied as the Call to Protest

4) The Quest for Community

**A Unified Worldview**

A unified worldview described spirituality as a way of being and life for many people of African descent. Bridges (2001) wrote,

> "African American spirituality, with an inherited African unified worldview, does not divide the human personality into distinctly separate spheres of mind, body, and soul. The self is an inextricable whole. To talk about African American spirituality is to talk about African Americans' way of being – mind, body, and soul – in American society" (p. 2).

In this sense, a unified worldview does not confine spirituality to one location, religious tradition, or ideology. Spirituality permeates all of life. A unified worldview creates the space for Black people to "[order] their life in terms of a blend of the ordinary and extraordinary worlds" (p. 6). A unified worldview connects the sacred and the secular and expects divine interaction in every avenue of life. The literature on HBTIs suggested that presidents wear dual hats as educational administrators and faith leaders. Assuming this is true, a unified worldview theme will assist the researcher in articulating the role of spirituality in the lived experiences of HBTI presidents.

**Black People's Self Definition of Human Identity**

The second theme of Bridges' (2001) African American spirituality framework described how people of African descent used spirituality as a liberating agent.

Spirituality empowered Black people to define their identity, understand their connection to the Black community, and affirmed their relationship to the divine. Historically, the first step in Black people's self-definition of human identity was "for the enslaved people in America to name one's experience for one's self and to name one's self" (p. 43). Bridges (2001) suggested that this theme empowers individuals of African descent to use their spirituality to inform their identity. Resultantly, this frame helped the researcher analyze how HBTI president's spirituality informed their identity.

**Spirituality Embodied as a Call to Protest**

Bridges (2001) described this theme as a "movement towards freedom…that resisted anything that would act as a barrier to the African Americans' sense of identity as it is discovered in community" (p. 7). She identified several individuals throughout history – Harriet Tubman, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ruby Bridges, and William Edmondson – who used their spirituality to combat oppressive, unjust systems. Inherent in this theme is recognizing how one's spirituality propels them to seek liberation for Black people and communities. This study aimed to understand how HBTI presidents used critical spirituality to combat narratives of institution deficiency. Of equal interest was understanding how HBTI presidents used spirituality to liberate the predominately Black constituency at HBTIs.

**The Quest for Community**

Bridges (2001) identified Black people's quest for community as a "longing and struggle for the freedom to be in community in the midst of an alien and racist surrounding culture that sought to destroy their culture" (p. 5). This struggle extends

beyond one's interest in personal gain. A quest for community points to Black people's historical work to stay joined together while striving to uplift and provide resources so that the community as a whole can thrive. The "quest for community" theme requires a community mindset (Bridges, 2001). A leader must work in the community with others, not as a manager, but as a community facilitator. As the literature suggested, HBTIs, while more diverse than they were 50 years ago, are still institutions that serve a predominately Black population. They are still centers where predominately Black students, faculty, staff, and administrators gather.

### Critical Spirituality and African American Spirituality

Using African American spirituality (Bridges, 2001) in conjunction with Dantley's (2005) critical spirituality framework enhanced my understanding of Black HBTI leaders. In addition to understanding how and why HBTI leaders lead, the theoretical and analytical frameworks helped me realize what compels and inspires HBTI leaders to lead. Using both frameworks enabled me to answer the foundational question of this study. Finally, employing two similar but differing frameworks helped with data triangulation.

## Methodology

I used Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyze the experiences of HBTI presidents. Smith et al. (2009) defined IPA as "a qualitative approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences" (p. 1). As such, IPA was appropriate for this research, as I sought to understand the lived experiences of Black presidents at HBTIs. IPA became a popular phenomenological

approach after Smith (1996) published an essay analyzing individuals' experiences in psychology with a methodological approach housed in the field of psychology. Today, qualitative researchers beyond the study of psychology use IPA (Smith et al., 2009). This study is a clear example of that.

IPA is idiographic: it wants to know as much as possible about an individual's experiences with and meaning-making of a phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). It moves beyond a pure description of a phenomenon to a desire to understand the phenomenon and what the phenomenon means to study participants (McConnell-Henry, Champan, & Francis, 2009). The desire to understand, make sense of, and hear as much as possible about HBTI president's experiences led to a significant amount of data.

IPA also uses a double hermeneutic, which stems from Heidegger (1962), who believed any description of a phenomenon requires the researcher to provide some form of interpretation (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009; van Manen 2015). A double hermeneutic created the space to make sense of study participants' experience while also working to interpret that experience as a researcher (Smith et al., 2009).

**IPA and HBTIs**

There are several reasons why the use of IPA was appropriate for this study. First, IPA is interested in understanding a participant's experience with a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009). This study focused on the shared experiences of Black presidents of HBTI's. Second, IPA provided space for me to analyze how HBTI presidents make meaning of their experiences at HBTIs. Finally, IPA allowed participants to form their realities around a phenomenon. Demonstrating the essence of

the respondents' perspective improves accuracy in representing the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). IPA is a useful methodological approach to help identify the meaning behind the experience of being an HBTI president (Smith et al., 2009).

## Methods

### Participant Selection

Smith et al. (2009) acknowledged that IPA studies generally have small sample sizes with relatively homogeneous participants. This study aimed to recruit three participants who identified as current or former presidents at HBTIs. I used purposive, homogeneous sampling to select the participants familiar with the phenomenon, reduce the variation in outcomes, and increase the chance for common themes to emerge (Patton, 2002; Roberts, 2013). Snowball sampling was also employed to identify additional participants who fit the criteria for this study. Snowball sampling was useful because participants with knowledge of the topic could connect me to others with similar information (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017).

HBTIs and their presidents are a tiny population within higher education. Recognizing this, I began pondering my personal and professional connections to individuals connected to HBTIs. Two people came to mind: a professor at an HBTI and a mentor who was a recently retired interim president of an HBTI. I spoke to both individuals about this project's seeds and my interest in having HBTI presidents participate. The HBTI professor connected me with two current HBTI presidents. The retired HBTI president invited me to consider expanding this study to include past HBTI

presidents' experiences. After speaking with the former HBTI president, I began seeking the participation of past presidents of HBTIs.

I identified and contacted twelve potential study participants by email. The email shared an invitation letter (as seen in Appendix B) and information about the project. The email also asked potential participants to identify other people who fit the participation criteria for this study. If I did not hear from individuals two weeks after my initial email, I sent a follow-up email inviting them to participate. Six responded to the initial invitation and shared their recommendations of potential participants.

In the end, three agreed to participate, one decided to participate but withdrew due to scheduling conflicts, and two declined. The participants, all self-identified as Black or African American and male, completed a survey before the first of three scheduled interviews. The survey – which asked questions about each president's demographic information, faith/religious background, academic training, and professional life – was used as an entry point into each president's lifeworld. It aimed to gain a better appreciation for how each president identified. I also used pseudonyms in place of participants' names and the HBTIs they represented to protect their identity and anonymity.

I called and spoke briefly with individuals who agreed to participate. The call's purpose was to discuss the project's scope and nature, review the informed consent information, answer questions the study participant had, and begin scheduling interviews. I worked with each participant to schedule three interviews at least one week apart. Scheduling interviews one week apart gave the researcher time to transcribe, listen to,

and reflect upon each president's previous interview. Reviewing interviews also generated follow-up questions that I asked participants at the beginning of the following interview. Those questions often developed into rich, in-depth responses that exposed the researcher to pivotal experiences for HBTI presidents.

**Data Collection**

This study analyzed two types of data: one-on-one, semi-structured interviews, and documents. The most common data collection method in IPA is semi-structured interviews (Larkin & Thompson, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to conduct in-depth conversations with participants (Patton, 2002). This phenomenological study aimed to reflect upon the lived experiences of Black presidents of HBTIs. As such, interviews were intended to contribute the most substantial portion of data for this study.

**Interviews.** The primary platform for conducting interviews was Zoom meetings, though one president initially desired to complete interviews via phone call. My initial plan was to interview each president in person at least one time. In-person interviews are often recommended as a beneficial method for building rapport with participants (Patton, 2002). Those plans quickly changed when educational institutions, including HBTIs, temporarily closed to prevent the potential spread of the Covid-19 virus on their campuses and in the communities where their campuses reside. Resultantly, I changed my in-person interview protocol to meeting each president virtually.

I reflected on what virtual interviews might mean to this study's success: will HBTI presidents take the time to converse with me about their experiences? Will my

three-interview protocol (Seidman, 2013) be possible? Could I build rapport with HBTI presidents virtually? Will I get detailed data that answered my research question? Despite my questions on the study's viability, each president graciously responded to the request to complete an initial questionnaire and three virtual interviews.

I interviewed HBTI presidents using Siedman's 90 minute, three interview protocol (Siedman, 2013). The first interview, as suggested by Siedman, focused on participants' life history. Seidman wrote, "the interviewer's task is to put the participant's experience in context by asking him or her to tell as much as possible about him or herself in light of the topic up to the present time" (p. 17). During the first interview, I asked HBTI presidents questions about their childhood, their most significant life influences, their connection to spirituality and religion, their family's faith background, and why and how they became educators and administrators.

The second interview in Siedman's three interview protocol concentrates on the details of a participants' lived experiences with a topic. Thus, my second conversation with participants focused on getting detailed information about Black presidents' lived experiences at HBTIs. This interview asked questions about study participants' professional life as the president of an HBTI, their pathway to the presidency, the opportunities and challenges of leading HBTIs, and how spirituality informs their leadership. Interview two captured an image of a day in the life of an HBTI president.

Finally, interview three invited participants to reflect upon questions of meaning. Seidman (2013) wrote, "Making sense or making meaning requires that the participants look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation."

(p. 18). Accordingly, the final interview built upon the insights shared during the first and second interviews. The last interview asked questions to uncover how participants make sense of their life as presidents of HBTIs.

Interviews followed a semi-structured interview protocol tied closely to the research questions and theoretical framework. Semi-structured interviews provided the flexibility to engage in conversation beyond structured questions while encouraging meaningful reflection and sharing (Finlay, 2013; Rubel & Okech, 2017). Each interview was digitally recorded, stripped of identifiable information, assigned an interview code, and transcribed using Otter Voice Meeting Notes. At the end of each interview, I wrote memos to remember thoughts, questions, and insights that arose while interviewing participants. A memo is a "conversation with ourselves about our data" (Clarke, 2005, p. 202). Writing notes of significant thoughts, experiences, and participants' expressions enhanced my ability to analyze the data (Miles, 2014).

**Documents.** Documents were the second form of data analyzed within this project. Documents included any written (i.e., open letters, written messages to the institution) and recorded material (i.e., public lectures, sermons, interviews, and addresses to the institution) that informed me of the lived experiences of Black presidents of HBTIs. Additionally, I asked participants to complete a questionnaire before their first interview. The questionnaire served to provide a picture of HBTI leader's academic, professional, and denominational backgrounds. In an effort not to essentialize the experiences of study participants – and to recognize the diversity of experiences within the lives of Black people – I asked participants how they identified themselves within

their understanding of Blackness (i.e., Black, African American, Black and Latino, Black Caribbean, etc.). Such a realization strengthened this research because it did not equivocate one understanding of Blackness with all study participants.

**Data Analysis**

The purpose of analyzing data in a qualitative study is to bring meaning and structure to the data (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). First, this study utilized a priori coding from Dantley's (2005) critical spirituality framework and Bridges' (2001) African American spirituality framework. Next, I used Smith et al.'s (2009) guidelines for IPA analysis as I searched for emergent themes within the a priori codes provided by Dantley (2005) and Bridges (2001). Smith et al. (2009) suggested that researchers first immerse themselves fully in the data by reading and rereading transcripts to become as familiar as possible with each participant's account. Subsequently, my initial data analysis involved reading and rereading each participant's transcripts. Another recommendation by Smith et al. (2009) was to listen to the recordings at least once while reading through each transcript. Listening to the recording helped me hear each participant's voice, which helped me remember when participants emphasized specific ideas or made noticeable inflections.

The second step in Smith et al.'s (2009) guidelines was to write initial notes connected to participants' words and language use. IPA does not specify what can be commented on (Noon, 2018; Sparkles & Smith, 2014). As such, Smith et al. (2009) recommended writing any noteworthy thoughts, observations, or reflections connected to each participant's comments in the margins of the transcript. This analysis stage allowed

me to consider what a participant said, how they said it, and what all those things combined told me about the experience. Such reflection ensured a more in-depth, interpretive analysis.

The third step in Smith et al.'s guidelines was to reread the transcript to identify emerging themes. Themes that emerged while coding transcripts were noted on the right margin of each transcript. I analyzed each transcript in addition to my exploratory notes to generate themes that seemed relevant to participants' reflections. This step involved reviewing my analysis from the first two steps of Smith et al.'s (2009) guidelines. Finally, I noted themes that emerged within each participants' interviews.

During the fourth step of Smith et al.'s (2009) guidelines, the researcher searches for connections across the emergent themes. This step involved looking at the emergent themes across the three interviews with one participant. I typed themes in chronological order before moving them around to cluster themes that seemed relevant to each other. Then I commented on the relevance of themes and their connection to one another. After determining their relationship, I decided whether the emergent theme connected to the study's central question. If a theme did not fit the aim of the project, I would discard it. Inversely, if I discovered a theme that connected to an aspect of this study's research question, I would type it in a separate document. Finally, I moved to the last step of Smith et al.'s (2009) IPA analysis, moving to the next case. I repeated these five steps for each participant involved in this study.

**Trustworthiness, Goodness, and Rigor**

Tracy (2010) identified eight "Big Tent" standards for high quality in qualitative research. Those eight "Big Tent" criteria are: (1) worthy research topics, (2) rich rigor, (3) sincerity, (4) credible, (5) ethical, (6) resonance, (7) a significant contribution, and (8) presentation with a meaningful congruence (p. 840). First, it was my moral mandate and responsibility to protect the identity, welfare, and information provided by each participant; and to follow the interview protocol and IRB approval regulations as closely as possible. Because the population size of HBTI presidents is small, keeping participants' identities anonymous was paramount.

In addition to the ethical mandate to not harm study participants or the field of study, this study aimed to establish trustworthiness. Establishing trustworthiness can include member checking, interviewer corroboration, peer debriefing, prolonged engagement, triangulation, and bracketing (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This study utilized member checking, peer debriefing, prolonged engagement, and data triangulation to advance trustworthiness, goodness, and rigor. Member checking involved sharing emergent themes found within the data with each participant to elicit their feedback and perspectives on the perceived findings. Member checking expanded trust between the researcher and participant and accomplished trustworthiness, rigor, and goodness within the study.

Engaged time in the field was also a strategy to establish trustworthiness (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). While I could not visit each president or HBTI in person, I collected rich data, interacted with research participants, and thoroughly researched the contexts where HBTIs emerge. Finally, I engaged in peer debriefing. Peer debriefing

provided the opportunity to work with colleagues who had some familiarity with the research and the willingness and ability to ask questions related to the process, biases, and steps to complete a thorough and thoughtful project (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017).

### Limitations and Delimitations

Discussing the limitations of this study is also a form of trustworthiness. Three ideas limited the scope of this project. First, there was a significant gap in research on HBTIs and their presidents. This gap in literature created the opportunity to explore many research venues on HBTIs. However, this study could not explore all of those paths. This study was limited solely to understanding the experiences of Black presidents of HBTIs and their use of critical spirituality. Second, there existed an inability to interview each participant in person due to the in-person restrictions created by the Covid-19 virus. Additionally, the distance between each HBTI and the minimal financial resources to conduct this project, multiple in-person interviews were not possible. My interviewing presidents on a video conferencing platform also created the possibility of not building rapport with study participants.

Finally, this was not a study on Christianity. While a Christian ethos may teem underneath the surface of participant experiences, it was not the researcher's intent to explore Christianity as a centerpiece within this study. Likewise, this study did not focus on spirituality in general but critical spirituality and its connections to African American spirituality.

## Researcher Positionality

Reflexivity is "the process of intentionally accounting for your assumptions, biases, experiences, and identities that may impact any aspect of your research study" (Lochmiller and Lester, 2017, p. 95). *I am a graduate of an HBTI. While I have fond memories of my experiences as a student at an HBTI, I also have memories of the challenges I experienced as a student at an HBTI. There were moments where I complained about administrative leaders seeming lack of care for its students, the lack of classes for students to complete, the limited amount of scholarships and aid, and the below-par living conditions of on-campus housing. There were also moments of great joy: experiencing my first Black professor, seeing scholars of color, learning based upon an Africentric model. My HBTI experience was a complete reversal of my primary and undergraduate educational experiences.*

Carnevale & Strohl (2013) wrote that people of color struggle because "the postsecondary system is more and more complicit as a passive agent in the systematic reproduction of White racial privilege across generations" (p. 7). *Growing up in a small, predominately White city in the mountains of Western North Carolina and attending college in the same area provided me with the personal lens to see how both the reproduction of White privilege and rising inequality dampened my aspirations as a young, Black man. I struggled to fight what Snipes (2016) called "the pernicious effects of White supremacy on my mind" (p.25). Each year, I learned the stories of exploration, leadership, and conquering focused solely on White people. Beyond Martin Luther King Jr., I heard very few people about people who looked like me.*

*Being the only Black student in most of my classes throughout primary education, seeing no Black professionals of any kind in my community, and hearing very few Black success stories negatively impacted my understanding of my brown skin. Not seeing adult, professional reflections of me in school or beyond made me, at times, feel like my story did not matter. These personal realities allow me to recognize my position as an "insider" within Black seminaries. Not only did HBTIs shape my understanding of religion, justice, and hope, but it also gave me tools to work with marginalized communities and people to struggle for freedom in the world.*

**Why Do I Engage?**

I believe that my educational training and professional background at the intersection of spirituality, religion, and the Black experience compelled me to speak up for, care for, celebrate, engage, and advance the knowledge base of religion and spirituality prevalent within the lives of so many people of African descent. I believe there is not enough research conducted on the experiences of HBTIs, their leadership, and their use of spirituality. I think my connection to this field of study is not a coincidence. It is a desire, a calling.

I believe that knowledge gained from the lived experiences of HBTI presidents will help transform people's lives, especially historically marginalized people. I engage because I believe this work is bigger than me. I engage because I feel led to leap headfirst into this work by something greater than myself. I think that historically Black theological education matters. I believe leadership matters. I believe people matter. I

dare to make a difference in people's lives, especially marginalized people through education.

**What Personal Assumptions do I Bring?**

I believe that strength-based research is the most effective way to explore the HBTI experience, to include the experiences of its presidents. I believe that HBTI leaders listen for the whispers, nudges, and guidance of a transcendent force. I believe that HBTI presidents have something to say. The HBTI is a place that trains students that will, in time, lead communities of faith critically and creatively.

**Relationship to the topic.**

I am not an HBTI president. Nor have I ever been. I have not carried the mantle of any educational institution's presidential leadership – or any organization for that matter. However, I, at times, aspire to embody the role of HBTI president. Despite my lack of presidential experience, I am a graduate of an HBTI. This fact makes me, in some ways, an insider: someone who has been in the world of historically Black theological education. I also feel like an outsider. I graduated from an HBTI more than a decade ago. As a result, I am not as connected as I once was. Nonetheless, my HBTI experience as a student gave me a fascination for understanding how HBTI presidents developed the knowledge base to lead HBTIs effectively. I introspectively asked questions about their educational, professional, and personal backgrounds.

## Chapter Summary

Chapter Three has provided a detailed description of the research design for this project. I stated that social constructionism and Black epistemological perspectives

would undergird the project. Critical spirituality (Dantley, 2005) and African American spirituality (Bridges, 2001) function as its theoretical and analytical frameworks. I presented the study's methodology: interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) and its research methods. Finally, I shared my positionality and my connection to this project. In Chapter Four, I share the findings from this research.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## FINDINGS

Chapter four's primary purpose is to present this study's findings while providing an analytical discussion around its emergent themes. The data collected and analyzed served to answer the foundational question of this study: How do Black presidents engage critical spirituality in their leadership of HBTIs? Four themes emerged from the findings presented by HBTI presidents: *I Am Because, Breaking the Chains of Psychological Slavery, Cultivating Transformation,* and *Taking Steps, Making Moves.*

Themes were developed considering the four concepts described in Dantley's (2005) critical spirituality framework. *I Am Because* replicates the first theme of critical spirituality, critical self-reflection. It shares findings related to presidents' honest self-reflection of their personal and professional lives and its influence on their role as HBTI presidents. *Breaking the Chains of Psychological Slavery*, the second theme presented, connected to the second component of critical spirituality, deconstructive interpretation. This theme shares each president's thoughts on navigating assumptions that HBTIs are, in some way, second class. *Cultivating Transformation* reflected each participant's insights around performative creativity, the third theme within critical spirituality. Finally, *Taking Steps, Making Moves* aligned with critical spirituality's last theme, transformative action. After introducing the participants of this study, chapter four presents the findings of this study.

## Study Participants

*I will never forget the first time I saw Alven Ailey's critically acclaimed dance Revelations. Revelations is a ballet written by Ailey in 1960 that explores places of profound pain, protest, and exuberant joy through sermonic escapades and soul-filled songs from the depth and breadth of the gospels, blues, and Black spiritual tradition. The famous soul-stirring dance, which touches fault lines in the experiences of Black people in America, propelled me to reflect upon the liminal space between two worlds: the world of struggle faced by so many people of African descent and a world of fervent hope, cultural pride, and excellence despite that struggle. I was drawn to the edge of my seat by Revelation's vibrant and constant undercurrent of spirituality vivified through dance, the profound expressions of joy and hope amidst challenges, and the role spirituality played in the personal and professional lives of people of African descent.*

The narratives and themes presented within this chapter glide with the soulfulness of Ailey's Revelations. The word revelation, which loosely means to reveal or uncover, is a befitting word to use as an entry point into the personal and professional life worlds of HBTI presidents who stood and stand at the intersection of leadership in graduate theological education and religious life. A close analysis of each participant and their personal and professional life stories as presidents of HBTIs showed the profundity of hope despite assumptions of being deficient, second rate institutions. Collectively their actions – like Ailey's dance – invite us to connect two worlds people often see as disjointed: spirituality and everything else.

**President Howard – Black Pride Seminary**

Howard is from a metropolitan area in the Southeast. Born to a teenage mother who was an honor student and a father who was the oldest sibling in his family, Howard described his beginnings as "humble." Despite those modest beginnings and the challenges that arose from it, Howard rose to leadership's highest rungs in multiple professional arenas. Self-described as African American and 60 plus years old, Howard was among the first Black people to earn a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree in religion from a university located in the northeastern part of the United States. Despite his academic study in theology and his ordination within a predominately Black denomination within the Christian tradition, Howard acknowledged he did not grow up in a family considered religious or spiritual.

In addition to his professional accomplishments, Howard has held multiple leadership roles throughout his academic and professional life ranging from high school and college student leader to HBTI president and chair of the board of trustees for nationally-recognized organizations. His memory was impressive as he continually recalled the intricate details of much of his life. He has been bi-vocational for most of his professional life, has retired multiple times, and has worked in higher education for more than three decades. Howard identified this as his first presidency of any kind.

**President Thurman – Young, Gifted, and Black Seminary**

Thurman sounded like a sage of theological education as he spoke about HBTIs and the theological education enterprise. Despite his knowledge of theological education, Thurman never anticipated being the president of an HBTI. He described himself as "diasporically Black," and the amalgamation of parents, grandparents, and ancestors

unwillingly pulled from the African shores, who lived in the Southeastern part of the United States, and migrating north to a major city in the Midwest. Like Howard, his memory of life events was extensive. In his early to mid-forties, Thurman's identity was shaped, in part, by a family involved in activism, religious life, and uplift for people of African descent. Familiar with the world and terrain of graduate theological education, Thurman has worked alongside presidents in graduate theological education as a senior leader for an organization described as a leadership incubator for people desiring to make a sincere difference in the world. Thurman was acting in his first presidency at the time of this study.

**President Taliaferro – Soulful Seminary**

Taliaferro was born in the Northeastern part of the United States but grew up outside of a prominent city in the South. Taliaferro seemed to teem with excitement as he spoke in long prose about what he understood to be the power of historically Black theological education, presidential leadership at HBTIs, and his joy for Black centers of learning. Like Thurman, Taliaferro was ordained by a predominately White denomination within the Christian tradition. He was in his mid-forties at the time of this study. Academically, Taliaferro completed a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in religion and a professional doctorate in theology. He has worked professionally as a college professor, mid-level administrator at an HBCU, and a pastor of multiple predominately Black congregations. Taliaferro was serving in his first presidency at the time of this study.

## I Am Because… (Theme 1)

*I Am Because* was the first significant theme presented in this project. Participants' introspective reflections on their identity as people and HBTI presidents suggested that people do not get to where they are without others' help. An analysis of data on these three men's personal and professional life experiences revealed an awareness that family, educators, mentors, and divine interaction were integral in helping them overcome obstacles and navigate the terrain of presidential leadership at HBTIs. Their words also recognized family members, educators, and mentors' influence on their identity as Black men and presidents of HBTIs. Three subthemes informed the theme, *I Am Because* (a) the support of family, (b) the power of mentorship, and (c) divine interaction.

**The Support of Family**

Each president spoke about their parents' influence – and, in one instance, their spouse – on their personal and professional identity as an HBTI president. When reflecting on the most influential people and lessons that informed his leadership, Thurman said,

> The older I get, the more I ground my consciousness in my mother and my father. My mother embodied what Black love looks like. Black love is inner armor. So, I never had to wonder whether I was completely known and completely accepted, which is my understanding of the definition of love. I never had to worry about that a day in my life because of the way my mother embodied that.

Thurman connected his love for Black people to his desire to create robust interstates of freedom for Black people and Black institutions. His Black freedom struggle, like his Black love-consciousness, was rooted in experiences with his parents.

> My father and my mother introduced me at an early age to the tradition of Black freedom struggle, in particular, the Black sacred element of that. So, I came up in that milieu and sort of Black freedom struggle, the deep part of my inheritance due to the vocation of my parents. And even on my mother's side, my grandma and my grandfather were labor organizers. So, that runs deep. And they made sure that they put [me] in proximity to movements and movement makers who represented the best of that tradition.

Like Thurman, Howard cited his parents and grandparents as people who influenced his thoughts about leadership. One motif that appeared throughout conversations with Howard was his work ethic. During his inauguration at Black Pride Seminary, Howard said his father taught him "to believe in the miracle of hard work." He added,

> "[My father] went to this trucking company and asked a guy if he could have a job. The guy told him; he pointed to a tractor-trailer and said, if you can back that truck up to the dock, maybe we'll get you a job. So, about an hour later, dripping with sweat, he learned to drive that truck."

Howard described how his work ethic, learned from watching his father, appeared in his work as an HBTI president. He explained,

> When I got to Black Pride Seminary, I said to the staff, none of you will outwork me. That's not a throw down. I work, you know, I think I'm always thinking

about opportunities to improve the school. I look at little things and big things. I'm looking to better the school.

In addition to an ethic of hard work gained from watching his father, Howard attributed his ability to persist as a quality learned from his mother. He said,

> I learned about persistence [from watching my mother]. I believe if you do a little bit every day, you can be as smart as anybody. So that taught me if I do the work now. I'll come out, alright. So, now, I work ahead.

Taliaferro's initial reflections on the most significant lessons and people that influenced his leadership practices at an HBTI seemed guarded and brief. When asked about the people and most significant lessons that influenced his leadership practices as an HBTI president, Taliaferro said that, in addition to the life and model of Jesus, his wife was the most influential person in his life and leadership. Taliaferro explained, "She's been a constant companion and source of inspiration, a sounding board, and advisor." Taliaferro was the only participant who explicitly mentioned a religious traditions central figure as influential to his leadership as a president.

**The Power of Mentorship**

The second subtheme that arose was the power of mentorship. As these men described what it meant to be an HBTI president, conversations on mentoring relationships emerged. Each president seemed to consider mentorship invaluable for their learning and success as institutional leaders. Their reflections on mentorship connected directly to the first subtheme, where each president interrogated their identity, attitudes, predispositions, and decision making against the backdrop of the people they

served. Three interconnected mentorship expressions were shared: (a) mentorship from former or current HBCU and HBTI presidents; (b) mentorship from formal and informal educators; and (c) peer mentorship.

Taliaferro highlighted the need for mentoring relationships with former and current presidents. He shared, "I'm a huge believer in mentors, whether they're direct mentors or mentors from a distance." To explain this point, Taliaferro said,

> In terms of the presidency, I always researched other president's historical and present. So, in terms of historical precedent, people like Booker T. Washington, who pretty much put Tuskegee University on his back...I tried to read almost everything he wrote and everything he said. In terms of current presidents, it was significant, as a [mid-level administrator] at an HBCU, just for me to kind of observe [the president], study him, talk to him, and get advice from him.

Thurman and Howard identified educators – particularly Black educators – as mentors who expanded their understanding of themselves and their ability to lead an HBTI. This was the second notion of mentorship highlighted by participants. Educators, both formal and informal, were described as central figures in their identity development. Howard named numerous educators throughout his life in academia that nurtured his development and leadership capabilities. When reflecting on his entire career, Howard said,

> When people look at my bio, they could say, man, you've achieved a lot. Well, the issue is I've had a lot of people to support me. And we don't get to where we are without the help of others. People help us. So, like the village, the village raises. Well, I've got a pretty broad village – in education, in the community, my

> church, and my denomination. And, they've invested a lot in me. Therefore, my sense of gratitude compels me to be a servant. And so, if anything, the notion is being a servant requires an investment of time and energy.

Like Howard, Thurman cited Sunday school teachers and graduate school professors as "incredibly influential" in expanding his "intellectual imagination."

The third image of mentorship, peer mentorship, emerged when Thurman referenced the wealth of practical knowledge he received while working with a peer at an institution dedicated to expanding graduate theological education students' imaginations. Thurman said,

> I paired with my comrade, who has been a huge influence. As a peer mentor, [he] and I shared an office when we first got to [this organization]. Out of a shared kind of disillusionment and a shared desire to see leadership cultivated in ways that undo and avoid the kind of toxic models that I think we came up with, we began to experiment with how might we design leadership formation that corrects for some of the stuff that we came up through.

Through each expression of mentorship, presidents depicted notions of resiliency, strength, and positive thinking about themselves as Black people and the power of predominately Black institutions in Black people's lives.

**Divine Interaction**

In their own way, each president described spirituality as an essential quality to their leadership of HBTIs. Participants' reflections on spirituality appeared to spotlight how their relationship to something greater than themselves compelled them to accept

who they were and see divine interaction imbued in all aspects of their life. When reflecting on spirituality and its connection to his life as an HBTI president, Thurman said,

> [My father] had a daily discipline of devotion in the morning, finding time to be still, to read, to study, to pray, to meditate. And not just to talk to God, but also to listen to the life of the Spirit. And that created a model for me to do the very same thing, which I'm finding to be an indispensable resource in the leadership of others.

When asked about the ways he incorporated these resources into his life as an HBTI president, Thurman explained,

> I pray. I do more meditation. I journal. I keep an altar. I spend time talking to God and my ancestors. And, here lately, I started a garden that's become a practice of tending to life. That's been a kind of contemplative practice. But for me, journaling meditation. I had a practice consistently of doing Qigong. But now I do it more sparingly, but it's still a part of my arsenal, you know, moving meditation. So, I got a smattering of tools, and most days, it's a matter of discerning when I get up, what I need.

Delving deeper into spirituality and its connection to his professional life, Thurman described how his spirituality helped him overcome obstacles. Thurman stated,

> Faith is the awareness that what I'm experiencing is not all there is. But there's another dimension of reality to which I'm connected, from which I can draw resources to face this materiality. Hebrews 11 says, through faith, we understand

> that the word of God framed the worlds. So the things which are seen were not made of things which do appear. So that what is visible, the source of what is visible is invisible. And, our capacity to tap into that immateriality gives us access to power to create reality. And co-create reality with Spirit. So, to answer your question, yes. There have been many things that faith has provided me the resources to work through.

Taliaferro's insights showed how his connection to and awareness of a higher power influenced his entire life to include his work as an HBTI president. When asked how spirituality has been instrumental to his life as an HBTI president, Taliaferro responded,

> Every time I go somewhere, I spend a considerable amount of time in the chapel or a sanctuary. When I was an undergraduate, one of the places I went to the most was the chapel. When I started pastoring, I made it a point to go in the sanctuary beyond Sunday morning. I would just go there during the week and pray. When I was a university chaplain, I did the same thing. Even now, at [Soulful Seminary], one of the things I do within the first hour – because if I don't do it within the first hour, my schedule will get away from me – I go to the chapel, get on my knees and pray. I do that every time I go to [Soulful Seminary] to go to work. I pray for myself, pray for my family, and pray for [Soulful Seminary]. And prayer has really, that's been essential for me to stay centered, to stay humble, to stay connected to God. You will have so many things pulling on you as the president. Many things pulling on you as the president that you didn't even know existed because you're working with a skeleton staff compared to

> other institutions. You're also working with fewer resources. The Black president and administrator, particularly president, is working between five to 10 times harder than a White president. So, to keep my sanity, to keep my health, to keep my relationship with God, I always have to pray multiple times a day and use the school itself as a place for prayer rather than only a place for work.

Like Thurman and Taliaferro, Howard spoke about the presence of something greater than himself intimately connected to all aspects of his life. When asked about spirituality and its connection to his HBTI presidency, Howard said, "I believe I have forces of good behind me." Howard acknowledged how those "forces of good" have helped him navigate potential conflicts with faculty and staff at Black Pride Seminary. Howard also connected his outlook as an HBTI president to spirituality.

> I give what I expect. I believe that none of us are perfect. I believe in grace and love. I believe in discipline. And, I believe in expectation. So, I try to be clear with people about expectations, and my faith is important to that. And in my faith, like when I did my trial sermon, it spoke on Romans 12, to be transformed by the renewal of your mind that you may prove what the good and perfect will of God is. It is thinking. We have to worship with our minds. We have to use our thinking and reasoning to make good decisions. We are changed by that, that it's a daily renewal and thinking and coming to good insights and good decisions. I believe that's what helps me to stay grounded in my work.

HBTI presidents also spoke of the role spirituality has played in shaping their identity. President's reflections mirrored Bridges (2001) idea that many people of African decent

use spirituality as a life-affirming tool for self-defining who they are personally and professionally. When asked about the influence of spirituality on his identity as an individual and HBTI president, Thurman said, "I don't know when I wasn't aware. I call myself a spirit man. And I was a spirit child. And the way that manifests for me was I walked around with a sense of wonder about the world."

Like Thurman, spirituality helped to shape Taliaferro's identity as a Black man and HBTI president. Taliaferro expressed that spirituality had been a part of his life since he could remember. Speaking of his earliest memories of spirituality and its influence on his identity, Taliaferro described how he and his family routinely attended two congregations whose polity and theology were radically different. He said,

> Growing up, we went Baptist, United Methodist, Baptist, United Methodist, because that was just part of our community if you were Black. I grew up in a community that if you were Black, you were either Baptist or United Methodist. And, those two worlds were intertwined. So, families attended both.

This childhood experience, among others, helped Taliaferro identify himself as: (1) an individual who loved Black people; and (2) a person who will work for the betterment of Black people without the need to pay close attention to deep-seated differences. Taliaferro said,

> I love Black people. I don't dislike other people. But I love Black people. And, I don't want us as a people to be part of an agenda. I want us to be the agenda. I don't want to be on the peripheral. I don't want to be an afterthought. I don't want to be a visitor. And, in Predominantly White Institutions, most people, most

> Black people, whether we're talking about students and professors, they are an afterthought. They are not part of the agenda. They are not part of the named agenda. They are visitors in their own space. They don't have any ownership. And in all those Predominantly White Institutions – they have some significant, positive aspects. I just felt that for me, to be true to who I am, and also for me to make a difference in my community, not just the BSU or a few African American athletic students, things of that nature, but for me to make a big difference in the life of my community, in a large scale, it would be within the HBCU, and I've loved it!

Howard made it clear that he was not raised in a very spiritual or religious family – though he considered his grandparents very faithful churchgoers. However, he described his connection to spirituality and its influence on his life through a story of a dispute with a childhood neighbor.

> I was probably seven, eight years old. We used to play marbles. On one occasion, I would win the marble game, and [my neighbor] would push me and take the marbles. So, I was crying. I remember going into the house, crying. I got over it and went back outside to play again. So, he did it again. So, I went in [back home]. I was crying, and my mother sat me on her lap and wiped the tears from my eyes. Then she said, if you come in the house crying again, I'm going to give you a whipping. I go back outside to play again. He's up to the same trick. So, I started crying again and then I realized I can't go into the house. Something said you can't go in the house crying again, man. So, I looked around for some

> leverage. I saw a brick. I went and got the brick, and he starts yelling and screaming and running. I chased him around the apartment, and I threw the brick at him. My mother heard me screaming, his mother heard him screaming, and his mother said to my mother, Howard threw a brick at [my son]. And my mother said, Well, I guess he better leave him alone.

Howard used the story to speak about spirituality and its connection to his identity.

> What I took from that was you need to learn to take care of yourself. Now, it didn't tell me to go out and beat up people. Don't be the aggressor but stand your ground. Believe it or not, that was a spiritual lesson around self-care and self-empowerment. Sometimes you have to get leverage, or you need to find the leverage if you can't do it.

Howard described what his connection to his understanding of God did for his personal and professional identity. He said,

> I don't believe I am secondary or inferior or I have to play second fiddle. I don't believe that. I believe that I'm as competent as any other leader, and that our institution is as viable as any other institution.

**Theme Summary**

In this theme, participants seemed to point to the idea that they were not self-made. Instead, they described their holistic growth being the result of others' wisdom, encouragement, lessons, love, and leadership experiences, which helped them develop qualities pertinent to HBTI leadership. Such a recognition highlighted these three presidents' we-centered consciousness (West, 2015) expressed in Black epistemology

and African American spirituality (Bridges, 2001). Participants' statements on the positive impact of mentors, family, and the divine on their identity and leadership also lifted a poignant point often not discussed in conversations on presidential administration in theological education, specifically how institutional leaders developed specific leadership competencies. After reflecting upon the ways countless individuals shaped their identity and influenced their leadership, participants reflected upon the ways their identity informed their ability to deconstruct the idea that HBTIs were second rate institutions.

## Breaking the Chains of Psychological Slavery (Theme 2)

The second theme that arose was that of *Breaking the Chains of Psychological Slavery*. This theme reflected participants' struggle to free people and institutions, especially Black people and HBTIs, from thoughts and feelings of inadequacy and deficiency. This theme, *Breaking the Chains of Psychological Slavery*, was intricately connected to the first theme, *I Am Because.* More explicitly, participants' positive understanding of themselves as Black men and HBTI presidents seemed to encourage them to work towards deconstructing the metaphorical chains of psychological slavery in others. Two significant subthemes emerged within this theme: *Countering Assumptions of Institutional Deficiency from Within* and *Strength-Based Institutional Narratives.*

### Countering Assumptions of Institutional Deficiency from Within

As each president reflected on their leadership at HBTIs, they talked about the need to counter the assumption that HBTIs were second-class. Their perspectives

revealed how some of the students, staff, and faculty of HBTIs perpetuated the second-class narrative about HBTIs. Thurman explained,

> White supremacy is a hell of a drug, but internalized oppression – that may be the worst drug out here. For us to have this wealth of a resource that has landed many thousands and for us to neglect its maintenance, not to mention its flourishing. It has been a travesty that has broken my heart and breaks my heart pretty much on a daily basis.

Other participants shared how their identity as an individual and HBTI president informed their ability to deconstruct institutional deficiency narratives among some students, staff, and faculty who attend or work at HBTIs. Deconstructive interpretation, defined as a leader's ability to understand their sacred worth intimately enough to remove any limiting thoughts about themselves and the institutions they serve in preparation for something better (Dantley, 2005, 2009), was crucial to participants' insights. Howard made sense of his desire to deconstruct habits that detract from the greatness of HBTIs by reflecting upon his priceless worth as an individual. He responded to the idea that the HBTI he served was second-class by stating,

> That might be the perception, but the reality is we're not. Part of it is convincing our faculty and staff because some of that resonates with us – that is, that we [are second class]. And, I say to them, I did not come here to [this HBTI] to lead a second-class school. That is not my background, and that is not my outlook. We're as qualified; I'm as qualified as anybody.

Taliaferro echoed Thurman and Howard when he spoke about some internal stakeholders' assumptions that HBTIs were second-class institutions. In fewer words, he shared, "Unfortunately, some Black people have – some, not all – have bought into that ideology."

Thurman worked to make sense of his role as an HBTI president in light of the challenges inherent in dealing with some students, staff, and faculty who perceived HBTIs as institutionally deficient. Thurman suggested how deconstructing people's harmful interpretations of HBTIs can create the opportunity for personal and institutional healing, which may lead to the positive reshaping of one's identity. He said,

> My work as a president is the work of facilitation. It's the work of repairing in some cases, creating in other cases, the channels and the pathways, the processes and the relationships for [this HBTI] to heal…and to recognize the value it has inherently – and can change the narrative about itself from this deficit, 'we don't have enough narrative' to we have more than enough to do what it is that we're called to do. Both in our internal staff and employees and students, but also in a broader network of relationships.

Thurman gave a specific example of how his work endeavored to deconstruct harmful narratives about HBTIs. He said,

> For the past decade, [this HBTI] has publicly cast itself as a struggling institution, desperately seeking to find its way and save its own life. That crisis narrative is over! We are using this moment of destabilization to imagine and innovate our educational and business models.

This subtheme revealed how HBTI presidents encountered narratives of being second class from people within the institution. It also showed how some presidents' thoughts about their own identity helped them combat institutional deficiency stories. Finally, this subtheme highlighted how participants worked to make sense of their role as HBTI president while addressing second-class narratives from within HBTIs.

**Strength-Based Institutional Narratives**

The second major subtheme shared was *Strength-Based Institutional Narratives.* This subtheme connected directly to the *Countering Assumptions of Institutional Deficiency from Within* theme, as it showed how presidents worked to replace those narratives of lack with strength-based narratives about HBTIs. Participants seemed to express the need for sharing counterstories depicting HBTIs as places of invaluable worth. Like Bridges' (2001) spirituality as a call to protest theme, each president's narratives described HBTIs as places that moved people toward freedom by resisting anything that acted as a barrier to Black people's sense of identity. This subtheme shares participants' thoughts on countering the notion that HBTIs are second-class institutions.

Taliaferro countered the idea that HBTIs are second class institutions by noting how HBTIs and HBCUs have a first-class commitment to Black people's dreams and aspirations that PWIs do not possess. Taliaferro said,

> HBCUs have a first-class commitment to the Black community that no other institutions have. HBCUs have a first-class commitment to Black people's dreams and Black people's problems that predominantly White institutions don't have. Now, it's not that Predominantly White Institutions don't have the

> resources. They do not have the will. So, I'm very confident and comfortable knowing that Soulful Seminary, because we have the history in the Black community, the Black community trust us, they know us, and the work we've done far outweighs any other Predominantly White Seminary in the country. Because the fact of the matter is White seminaries just started accepting Black people in the 1970s or 1980s, and maybe the 60s, and that's a big maybe. But it generally happened in the 70s and 80s by a large measure. Well, Soulful Seminary, we were educating folks 100 years before that. So, in terms of the relationship and the first-class commitment, that's undeniable.

Taliaferro also used examples of tragic national events where Black people were victims of heinous acts of violence to share a strength-based narrative about HBTIs as places of affirmation for Black people. His words offer a distinction between HBTIs and PWTIs ability to consistently affirm students, staff, and faculty from minoritized communities. Taliaferro said,

> In 2020, when we still have Black people being publicly lynched in different ways, whether it's a person kneeling on your neck, or a White person's knee on their backs, or shooting Black people, White people shooting Black people in the back, Black seminaries, they're one of the few places within seminary culture that will celebrate and affirm Black bodies. You're not going to get that at White seminaries 365 days of the year. You may get a token of that. And I mean token of that in February. The mere fact is Black people are going through hell, not only in February but the other 11 months out of the year. So, the affirmation that

> Black people need, just like all people need, is significant, and it's essential for their progress. So, just aesthetics alone when you walk into a Black seminary when you walk into Soulful Theological Seminary and other Black seminaries, you're going to see Black people on the wall. When you walk into White institutions, you're not going to see that, and symbols are powerful. So, when you're walking in Black seminaries, you're going to see Black people on the wall. That means you know what, you are welcome, you are a part of us, and we are a part of you.

For Thurman, HBTIs provide a lens for viewing and understanding the world theologically in ways that PWIs do not fully engage. Thurman stated,

> At its best, one of the gifts of Black theological education is its hermeneutic. We can see what our White counterparts and those trained by White counterparts have been trained not to see. So our bifocal hermeneutic [helps us understand] why John Calvin is not the model for Black theological education. The kind of stuff that our counterparts have to take at [prominent predominately White theological institution] or any other kind of place. That's not even a question we have to wrestle. And we know this. So we can start from that place and own a hermeneutic as a given.

Howard's words provided a lens for viewing HBTIs as institutions that keep America accountable to its citizenship ideals. He detailed,

> I think Black theological education is essential. I think the Black Seminary and The Black Church have helped America fulfill its promises of being a place that's

> the land of the free and the home of the brave. It is The Black Church that pushed the larger culture to be authentic and not to be hypocritical.

Taliaferro made sense of his work as an HBTI president by identifying HBTIs as schools that offer its people invaluable resources. He said,

> [This HBTI] can give you what money cannot buy. I would explain what I meant by that in terms of an unwavering commitment to their personhood. An unwavering commitment to their success. They will be more than just a number. The affirmation of their community and their culture. But that's a different way of looking at it.

**Theme Summary**

*Breaking the Chains of Psychological Slavery* shared how each president worked to change the negative perception of HBTIs. Participants described their work as a two-fold task: (a) resisting and deconstructing HBTI deficiency narratives and (b) replacing those deficiency-laden accounts with strength-based stories about HBTIs and their leadership. Their insights on dismantling any thoughts or words that diminished Black people and institutions' opportunity to excel (Earl, 2003) was connected to Bridges' (2001) spirituality as a call to protest theme. Their understanding of their identity as Black men, HBTI presidents, and people connected to an entity more significant than themselves informed their ability to help constituents within HBTIs recognize their sacred worth and identity, not their deficiencies. To be sure, the men in this study seemed to speak passionately about their work of resisting narratives of lack and sharing stories of strength. What arose from presidents' objective of deconstructing deficient-

laden thoughts among HBTI constituents was presidents' attempts to build a stronger HBTI by cultivating a new vision for the HBTI and its people.

## Cultivating Transformation (Theme 3)

The third theme presented within this project was *Cultivating Transformation*. This theme connected directly to the first two themes; *I Am Because* and *Breaking the Chains of Psychological Slavery*. Each presidents' awareness of their identity as Black men and HBTI presidents (Theme 1) informed their ability to deconstruct deficient laden narratives and share counternarratives about the strengths of HBTIs (Theme 2). The information presidents garnered from the first two themes laid the foundation for the third theme, which focused on presidents' development of new strategies to cultivate transformation within HBTIs (Dantley, 2005). Two subthemes informed this phenomenon, *Up from Here* and *It's Not About Me*.

### Up from Here

The data from these three presidents' stories revealed different perspectives on what their institutions needed to move closer to their defined success measures. However, one concept seemed central to these presidents' work: propelling the institution upward or forward. Hence the theme *Up from Here*. Paramount to HBTIs moving upward was what participants described as HBTIs ability to ask the right questions.

**Asking the Right Questions.** Central to developing new strategies that cultivate transformation within HBTIs was the need to ask and answer the right questions. Each HBTI president suggested HBTIs begin asking and answering crucial questions about their identity, leadership, and purpose for existing. Collectively, their insights seemed to

indicate that an HBTIs ability to thoroughly and thoughtfully answer questions of its purpose and identity was a crucial first step toward the desired institutional goals set by each HBTI. During a consultation with a former HBTI president and their team, Thurman pointed out the need for HBTIs to begin asking the correct questions that propel the institution forward. Thurman said,

> When we first sat down, the president said, 'we've been holding these conversations with church leaders asking what 21st-century education needs to look like. I said that's the wrong question. [This HBTIs] question is, who do we serve? What do they need to accomplish? And how [is this HBTI] uniquely positioned and gifted to all of that?

Howard and Taliaferro directed their questions toward HBTI leaders. Their focus was on the need for HBTI leaders to develop a guiding vision for HBTIs. Howard said,

> Be clear about what your objectives are as a leader. What is your vision? Make that vision clear?

Similarly, Taliaferro shared,

> When you're president, the Board of Trustees, alumni, [and student body] are equally influential. And you have to engage them a lot, or things will fall apart quickly. So, you should use a lot of time visioning. What's your vision? What's the vision of the school? Those are critical questions to help guide your direction forward.

The data also suggested that advocates of HBTIs, like HBTI presidents, must be knowledgeable enough to ask guiding questions that will help thrust the school in a direction desired by the HBTI. Thurman shared,

> We are using this moment to imagine and innovate our educational and business model driven by key questions: What do our churches and communities need from [this HBTI] now? What competencies do faith-rooted leaders in Black America and the African Diaspora need to facilitate communal flourishing, freedom, and sovereignty? How might we design and deliver Black theological education in a form that maps to the realities of the 21st-century learner?

**It's Not About Me**

Participants' shared a poignant point rarely discussed in leadership literature: presidents need to sacrifice their egos and individuality and adopt a "we" centered consciousness as they attempted to initiate projects that propelled HBTIs forward. That "we" centered consciousness and call for community-oriented thinking drove presidents to consider projects that enhanced both the HBTI and the community surrounding the HBTI. Within the data, presidents continually referenced what they were doing to aid institutional transformation while deliberately using the word "we." Thurman described this concept as Black Excellence. He stated,

> Excellence in our culture is typically framed by individual performance, tied to one's aspirations typically for their own personal gain. Black Excellence is a standard of preparation for one's life's work tied to a legacy of struggle and

> resistance. Black excellence is about me doing my work in such a way that it benefits the livelihood and increases the life chances of my people.

Thurman expanded the conversation to include the idea that deep-seated institutional change requires listening to the probing questions and insights of advocates of HBTIs, not just its presidents. Thurman said,

> I sat with the [leaders] of the constituent seminaries and fellowships affiliated with [this HBTI]. During that meeting, one of the deans issued a challenge to the room. "Collectively, the five denominations affiliated with [this HBTI] claim a membership of over 25 million African Americans. Together we build leadership for churches and communities that represent over half of Black America! What other institution is positioned like [this HBTI]? So what are we going to do with this potential for impact?"

Such questions led HBTI presidents and HBTI constituents to consider ways to influence change within the institution and the surrounding community. While talking about the projects his institution was planning to implement, Taliaferro's language suggested the importance of a plurality of leadership. His words seemed to show how HBTI presidents can bear witness to the skills, intellect, gifts, leadership, and wisdom of multiple people, enhancing the possibility of institutional change. Taliaferro said,

> We are in the early stages of preparing what's called a Black Church Food and Land Security Institute, which becomes a strategy to build pastoral leaders who know how to leverage land resources. And in both the theological and spiritual kind of capital, black congregations can build self-sufficient food, growth, and

> distribution systems, which become a basis for economic and political strength and power.

Like Taliaferro, Thurman articulated how multiple people within HBTIs must provide leadership to HBTIs. When discussing the importance of creatively rethinking and restructuring Young, Gifted, and Black Seminaries' entire organizational model, Thurman pointed to the need for the whole organization to shift. Thurman said,

> The mission and vision of [this HBTI] have never been more urgent. Given what we're about, what we've been about historically, and where our people are, where our congregations are at this point, where our communities are now, it's never been more urgent. Secondly, [this HBTI] is uniquely positioned in theological education to be an impactful conduit for positive change. Third, if our mission and vision are going to have a future, this institution needs to be overhauled from top to bottom. And by top, I mean the board. By bottom, I mean everything else.

While these three men shared a "we" centered consciousness when talking about their role in transforming institutions, Howard highlighted a potential challenge of collaborating with others. He shared,

> I'm more relational and, I would say my predecessor was more aloof, and [he] was more dictatorial. I tend to be more collaborative, which can be challenging because some of the faculty took my effort of collaboration as a weakness.

Despite the challenges of collaborating with others, the overarching participants' seemed to agree that involving people in cultivating a vision of transformation expanded HBTI president's ability to aid in the transformation of HBTIs. When asked about what it

means for HBTI presidents to engage in helping their institutions ask and answer questions that lead to change, Thurman stated,

> I'm convinced that we have not been suffering from a lack of resources. We have been suffering from a lack of imagination. A wise colleague once reminded me, "There is no shortage of resources. There is only a shortage of compelling narratives that draws resources from where they are to where we need them to be." Compelling narratives are the product of imagination and integrity. They are derived from a deep dissatisfaction with the status quo and a deep belief that we can co-create another way. We must be willing to dream big. Then we must be willing to walk the talk of change, shifting our practices and culture to manifest the future to which we are being called.

**Theme Summary**

In this theme, *Cultivating Transformation,* participants shared how they assisted HBTIs with developing and implementing a new, more compelling vision that thrust them beyond envisioning survival as the model for ultimate institutional success (Earl, 2003). These insights connected directly to the third theme of critical spirituality, performative creativity (Dantley, 2005). As such, this theme showed how these three men began to support their respective institutions in creating a new vision for a more viable future.

*Cultivating Transformation* expressed leaders' development of strategies and practices to move HBTIs and the learning community away from accepting or perpetuating the status quo (Dantley, 2005). *Up from Here* related directly to the position

and direction HBTI presidents felt their institutions and its people should be moving. Each president described how they strived to strategically position their respective HBTIs to be alive, viable, appealing, and effective in the 21st century and beyond. Their insights showed that readjusting an institution's strategy may take courage, care, and effort.

## Taking Steps, Making Moves (Theme 4)

The final theme presented in this study is *Taking Steps, Making Moves.* This theme connects to the last section in Dantley's (2005) critical spirituality framework, transformative action. Transformative action is where an educational leader's decision-making enhances people, institutions, and communities. *Taking Steps, Making Moves* shows how these three presidents' actions strived to transform HBTIs, their people, and the community surrounding the HBTI. One major subtheme captures the essence of these HBTIs reflections: start now.

### Start Now

The importance of starting projects was paramount for study participants. *Start Now* reflects these three men's thoughts on the necessity of valuing the time and work one has while serving in the position of HBTI president. Two ideas emerged underneath the words shared by presidents related to starting projects sooner rather than later: (a) *Be Visible,* and (b) *Plan the Work, Work the Plan*

**Be Visible.** Showing up and being present was described as a crucial act of presidential leadership. As one president's reflections suggested, the seeds of transformation may emerge due to the physical presence and actions of HBTI presidents.

Howard, who in one instance proudly self-described himself as the "senior janitor," noted,

> When I got to [this HBTI], I wanted to make sure that the campus's appearance looked great. I remember picking up paper on campus one day, and somebody said, you're the president. What are you doing picking up paper? I said this is our campus. It's like our house. The notion is, this should be a place of pride. I picked it up because we need to have pride. They might think because we're a Black school that we're going to be secondary. So, when [people] come on campus, [they] are amazed.

In another instance, Howard showed how his presence, imagination, and life experiences influenced his ability to transform the campus's image.

> When I came aboard, we were paying a guy about $1,000 a month to cut the grass. I said that's too much. So, the maintenance guy said, 'Look, I could cut the grass if I get a riding lawnmower.' I said, okay. He said, 'There's one at Lowe's for $4,000.' I said, 'Let me go check it out.' So, I went over to Lowe's and asked to speak to the manager. I said, 'I'm from Black Pride Seminary. We're down the street from you. We do a lot of business with you. How can you help us with this lawnmower?' He said, 'I will give it to you for what I paid for it: $3,000. He marked it down $1,000, and he said, 'plus tax.' I said, 'We're tax-exempt.' He said, 'Okay, well, we won't charge tax.' So, I said, 'That's good. Can you help us?' He said, 'I tell you what; I'll give it to you for $2,000.' So, I said, 'That's great.' So, I called up our maintenance guy and said, 'Come get you

> lawnmower.' So, helping him get a lawnmower so he can cut the grass. Then he said, 'I don't know anything about trimming hedges around on campus.' I said, 'I tell you what, don't worry about that. When I go [home] next time, I'm going to bring my hedge trimmers back.' One day, I brought them back and put on my boots, gloves, and shorts. Everyone was gone. The security people said, 'What's [Howard] doing?' I had gotten the extension cord out, and I trimmed the hedges.

These three men's insights revealed that a president's presence and words matter. Their presence and words can transform the people inside HBTIs and the institution itself. One president said,

> One of the students at a town hall meeting with the students asked, what can we do [to help the HBTI] in this moment? I said, don't bullshit. Don't bullshit in your work and your studies, and your preparation. Take this thing seriously.

These interactions, where HBTI presidents are physically present at events, show how an HBTI president's presence can plant the transformational seeds. Merely showing up provides avenues for change to emerge. Howard and Thurman's insights also recognize the need for presidents to possess an ability to work with individuals that institutions often exclude from its decision-making process. Howard's willingness to collaborate with the maintenance person, coupled with his desire to have a well-manicured campus, transformed the campus's physical image.

**Plan the Work, Work the Plan.** The transformative actions of presidents were wide-ranging. However, their aim seemed to focus on empowering people within HBTIs. A dominant narrative shared within this theme was transforming institutional strategies

into actionable pursuits. Howard described planning and implemented a solution-oriented approach to his presidency.

> People would bring me a problem to solve. I said, here's what I expect of you as a director or coordinator. If you bring a problem to me, you need to bring two solutions. So they've thought about how we're going to solve this. So, they think twice about bringing something to me. I want them to bring issues, but I'm teaching them something beyond that. They're in positions. They have authority. And, they have ability. So, you can solve [the problem] as well.

As some of the data suggested, moving from an institutional dream to an institutional reality takes courage, effort, and a well thought out plan. Thurman said,

> We are creating a [Young, Gifted, and Black Seminary] 2.0. [This Young, Gifted, and Black Seminary] 2.0 village is envisioning and initiating a new institutional model. We are working to build a model that is accessible, effective, and impactful. [Our work is a calling] to cultivate a new generation of prophetic problem solvers. Prophetic problem solvers are led by the Spirit's guidance and the lure of their community's questions, not by the certainty of their expertise. In concert with advocacy and protest, leaders in this mode seek to build solutions. They imagine and design alternatives to the status quo. They are called toward the pursuit of what we desire, as much as they are active in the resistance to what we oppose. This is the kind of leadership [this HBTI] seeks to cultivate.

Presidents also mentioned the powerful transformative qualities of well-developed programs and technological enhancements that improve HBTIs viability. Taliaferro

combined his professional background as a military officer with his position as an HBTI president to create a new plan inviting students to consider military chaplaincy as a promising career option upon graduation. Taliaferro shared,

> By God's grace, we were able to create a center for chaplaincy, and we were able to create a few other things such as writers retreats and a robust continuing education program. Those things didn't happen by accident. Those things happened through a lot of visioning, prayer, partnerships, investing, and strategic planning.

In addition to creating programs to expand the educational and professional pursuits of HBTI students, HBTI presidents shared how technological advances can transform the image and idea about HBTIs. Thurman speaking about the creation of a new website, said,

> If you look at our website, our website was developed by the company that did the website [for a major theme park]. They had never done a website for an educational institution. They made the best presentation and offered the best costs, and although they had never done an educational institution before, they did quite well. So the way that comes across, it's easy to navigate. Now folk say, you all got a bang-up website. [I say] well, what did you think that we're going to have? So it's a good website that positively and powerfully changes the image of our school.

Presidents must also work to create strategic partnerships that expand the financial and intellectual resources of the institution. Taliaferro said,

> Create partnerships. Create partnerships not only within the Black community, but it's equal. The strategic planning [and] looking ahead. You need to know what's going on. But you also need to envision where you want [to be] coming over the horizon, six months, a year, 18 months, and two years.

Finally, Howard described the imperative for creating a presidential succession plan. Such a project was a resourceful action of transformation for an HBTI. An HBTI succession plan was not present in the literature on HBTIs; however, it can prove a helpful model for other institutions to adopt. Howard said,

> I see my big task now as identifying and recruiting the next president because the issue of some historically Black institutions is that they don't do well with transferring of leadership. Then the leader leaves, and the school begins to flounder because they haven't thought about it. So, developing a succession plan that if something happened to me today, if I decided to resign today, they didn't have a plan about what they would do next. So, they developed that plan.

**Theme Summary**

This theme used Dantley's (2005) transformative action theme to express the ways HBTI presidents work to transform the HBTIs they serve. When engaging the data, it was clear that presidents were striving to change the image of HBTIs from second class institutions to well-resourced, engaged, and intellectually relevant spaces. Hence, the title of the theme, *Taking Steps, Making Moves*. Presidents' insights suggested that HBTI leaders should *Start Now* with the recognition that: (a) their presence matters; and (b)

they should plan the work and work the plan of transformation for their respective HBTIs.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter has aimed to answer the foundational question of this study: How do Black presidents engage critical spirituality in their leadership of HBTIs? I presented this chapter's findings using the thematic order of Dantley's (2005) critical spirituality framework. I also used Bridges' (2001) African American spirituality framework to analyze the influence of spirituality on HBTI president's leadership. Four themes emerged while utilizing Dantley's critical spirituality framework: *I Am Because, Breaking the Chains of Psychological Slavery,* and *Taking Steps, Making Moves.* Chapter Five will discuss this study's results, share implications for practice, and offer future research suggestions to propel HBTIs and their presidents forward.

# CHAPTER FIVE

# DISCUSSION

"We need leaders – neither saints nor sparkling television personalities – who can situate themselves within a larger historical narrative of this country…who can grasp the complex dynamics of our peoplehood and imagine a future grounded in the best of our past, yet who are attuned to the frightening obstacles that now perplex us."

(West, 2001, p. 13).

This study's seeds came to life during my experiences as a graduate professional student at The Morehouse School of Religion at The Interdenominational Theological Center, an HBTI in the heart of downtown Atlanta, Georgia. There I developed a sincere interest in research on HBTIs, their mission, and leadership. Nearly ten years later, this study's seeds began to bud while completing a graduate course on critical race theory in education. That course became the catalyst that propelled me to search for critical frameworks that focused attention on spirituality. One emerged: critical spirituality (Dantley, 2005). After discovering critical spirituality was a leadership framework intended to enhance educational leaders' leadership practices, I turned my attention to literature focused on the experiences of presidents of HBTIs.

## Study Overview

A review of the literature on HBTIs and their presidents detailed three underlying problems. First, there was a lack of literature documenting the experiences, challenges, and successes of HBTIs and their presidents. HBTIs have collectively graduated the most Black theologians globally; however, their existence is hardly known (Albritton,

2012; Brown, 2013; Ricard, Brown, & Foster, 2008). Second, few studies have provided an anti-deficit-based lens for viewing historically Black theological education and its presidents. Deficit focused literature on HBTIs, and its leadership diminishes individuals' and organizations' opportunity to learn from the rich history, legacy, and presidencies of HBTIs. Finally, limited research focused on critical spirituality as a leadership framework within higher education. The studies that utilized critical spirituality as a theoretical and analytical framework focused solely on principals' experiences at P-12 schools in metropolitan areas.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study aimed to reflect upon Black presidents' experiences at HBTIs through the lens of critical spirituality. Foundationally, I wanted to understand how HBTI presidents overcame personal and professional obstacles, challenged assumptions of institutional inferiority, and engaged in the struggle for physical and psychological freedom for HBTI constituents and the communities they serve.

**Research Question**

One question guided this research:

1. How do Black presidents engage critical spirituality in their leadership of HBTIs?

**Review of the Methodology**

This project used critical spirituality (Dantley, 2005) and African American spirituality (Bridges, 2001) to understand Black HBTI presidents' experiences. Because Dantley incorporated portions of Bridges' African American spirituality framework into

his critical spirituality framework, I used it to analyze the spiritual and religious backgrounds of HBTI presidents. Social constructionism and Black epistemology provided the epistemological and philosophical underpinning for the study. Finally, IPA (Smith et al., 2009) was employed to interpret the lived experiences of HBTI presidents and their use of critical spirituality.

Three current or former HBTI presidents – self-identified as Black or African American and male – participated in the study. To collect data, I used Seidman's (2013) three interview protocol in addition to a preliminary questionnaire. The questionnaire helped me enter each participant's lifeworld and generate additional questions for participant interviews. I used a priori coding from Dantley's (2005) critical spirituality framework and Bridges' (2001) African American spirituality framework to create emergent themes based upon HBTI presidents' experiences. Finally, I looked for emergent themes within each theme.

Rich data arose from HBTI presidents' reflections on their experiences of being the president of an HBTI. Particularly noteworthy were the comments about the influence of family on their identity as HBTI presidents, how HBTI presidents mitigated narratives of second-class status, and the strategies used by HBTI presidents to transform HBTIs. This chapter summarizes this study's research findings while connecting those findings to the current literature on HBTIs and their presidents. After summarizing the results, I share implications for practice and recommendations for further research on HBTIs and its leadership.

## Summary of Findings

The first theme identified was *I Am Because*, which reflected the first step of critical spirituality, critical self-reflection. This theme found that HBTI presidents were able to overcome personal and professional obstacles, challenge narratives of institutional deficiency, and fight for the liberation of HBTIs and their people by (1) drawing inspiration from the cultural and intellectual wealth of their family; (2) utilizing the power of mentorship; and (3) connecting with their spirituality. Combined, the themes within critical self-reflection depicted a tapestry of tools that helped HBTI president's overcome obstacles.

Next, I observed how HBTI presidents employed deconstructive interpretation, the second theme within critical spirituality. Two findings emerged within the theme, *Breaking the Chains of Psychological Slavery*. First, this study found that HBTI presidents refuted the idea that HBTIs were second-rate institutions. The second finding within this theme found that HBTI presidents worked to reframe thoughts about HBTIs and their presidents by sharing counterstories about HBTIs. Within this theme, participants collectively pointed to the need to deconstruct the HBTI deficiency myth to build more effective HBTIs.

*Cultivating Transformation* was the third theme developed in this study. This theme was connected to the third theme within critical spirituality, performative creativity. This theme found that: (1) HBTI presidents countered institutional deficiency assumptions from within; and (2) HBTI presidents replaced deficiency narratives with a strength-based institutional narrative. It was fascinating to note how HBTI presidents creatively engaged institutional challenges and articulated what HBTIs provided within

higher education. Subthemes within performative creativity touched upon the imagination, courage, and positive outlook of HBTI presidents as they led HBTIs.

Finally, *Taking Steps, Making Moves* reflected Dantley's (2005) transformative action, the last theme within critical spirituality. One significant subtheme emerged. HBTI presidents must *Start Now* by developing new institution-wide leadership models that enable institutional success. Within this theme, two additional themes emerged, (a) *Be Visible*; and (b) *Plan the Work, Work the Plan.* The subthemes within transformative action pointed to HBTI president's efforts to move HBTIs towards a more viable future. Within this theme, participants disclosed the need to engage and partner with students, faculty, staff, trustees, alumni, and advocates of HBTIs to propel them along the road towards transformation.

## Discussion of Findings

This section discusses this study's findings while connecting those findings to previous literature on HBTIs and their presidents. As stated previously, this study utilized a priori coding from critical spirituality (Dantley, 2005) and African American spirituality (Bridges, 2001) to analyze participants' experiences as presidents of HBTIs. Within each theme, I looked for emergent themes and subthemes that captured the HBTI president's experiences. I discuss those themes and subthemes in light of Dantley's critical spirituality framework.

### I Am Because (Theme 1)

#### Draw Inspiration from Cultural and Intellectual Wealth of Family

Previous literature on presidential leadership in graduate theological education detailed the challenges of leading theological schools (Aleshire et al., 2006; Gillespie, 2004; Lewis & Weems, 2006; McCarter, 1994). However, that body of literature did not detail how seminary presidents overcame those challenges. This study found that Black HBTI presidents overcame personal and professional obstacles, challenged institutional inferiority assumptions, and engaged in the struggle for physical and psychological freedom for HBTI constituents and the communities they serve, first, by drawing inspiration from the cultural and intellectual wealth of their family.

Howard, Taliaferro, and Thurman were quick to note how their parents, grandparents, and spouses' actions and life lessons informed how they viewed themselves and their leadership at an HBTI. Howard described his parents as his reference point, reminding him to stay grounded while serving as an HBTI president. Thurman connected his parent's love for Black people and their pursuit of liberation for Black people to his desire to love and liberate Black people as a president of an HBTI. This finding suggested that HBTI presidents drew inspiration from their lived experiences with family members – and those experiences helped them face the opportunities and obstacles of presidential leadership at HBTIs.

**The Power of Mentorship**

This study mirrored previous research on mentoring relationships among HBCU presidents (Adida et al., 2020; Brisco & Freeman, 2019). HBTIs are a subset of HBCUs. Like the studies on mentoring relationships among HBCU presidents, HBTI presidents

found that mentoring relationships with presidents of HBTIs and other higher education institutions were pivotal to their growth, development, leadership, and success.

Taliaferro noted how mentoring relationships were pivotal for his understanding and success as an HBTI president. Collectively, participants identified professors, athletic coaches, colleagues, and college presidents who they considered invaluable mentors throughout their personal and professional life. Taliaferro expanded mentorship to include HBTI and HBCU presidents who have died but whose leadership can still be studied through their writings and other scholars' writings about them. Despite the limited research on the effect of mentorship on the leadership practices of HBTI presidents, this study found that mentorship from other HBTI and HBCU presidents played an integral role in presidential success at HBTIs.

**Spirituality Matters**

Spirituality was a significant talking point for each participant. Previous literature on spirituality among presidents of seminaries mirrored this finding (Chandler, 2017; Lewis & Weems, 2006; Newlin et al., 2002). This study also affirmed one study that noted spirituality, though a "hard to define, almost mysterious, dimension of presidential leadership," is a centerpiece for presidential success at theological schools (Lewis & Weems, 2006, p. xii). Though spirituality was challenging to define from each participant's shared experiences, HBTI presidents credited their spirituality with helping them overcome obstacles and lead HBTIs.

Similarly, the findings echoed previous literature that affirmed that Black people's spirituality was interconnected with all facets of their lives (Bridges, 2001).

Like Bridges' (2001) research, HBTI presidents connected their spirituality with their entire life, to include their life as an HBTI president. HBTI president's practice of spirituality – shown in their devout prayer life in the office, their belief in a higher power conspiring to protect and assist them during board meetings and faculty and staff meetings, their reverence toward their ancestral altars and mentors, and their meditative practices – guided them daily in their role as president.

**The Black Church.** Previous literature connected HBTIs to The Black Church Tradition (Lewis & Weems, 2008; Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990; Walton, 2008). This study resonated with that body of literature, as it found a connection between HBTI presidents and The Black Church tradition. In addition to serving as current or former presidents of HBTIs, participants also identified as faith leaders certified (i.e., ordained) by three different Christian denominations. Though participants were presidents of HBTIs and connected to The Black Church tradition, it was interesting to note that two participants were connected to and ordained by predominately White, Christian denominations.

In contrast, one president was ordained by a Christian organization explicitly created by Black people to care for Black people. HBTI president's connection to predominately White denominations raised additional questions not pursued in this study. For instance, how do HBTI presidents navigate their work as HBTI presidents while being connected to predominately White denominations? Further research can engage the interplay between HBTI president's professional life and denominational backgrounds.

## Breaking the Chains of Psychological Slavery (Theme 2)

### Countering Narratives of Institutional Inferiority

This study agreed with previous studies that articulated the assumption that HBTIs are second-class institutions lacking the vibrancy and resources of PWTIs (Wheeler et al., 2006). Also consistent with previous studies was HBTI president's work to combat narratives that HBTIs were second-class institutions (Wheeler et al., 2006). Howard, Taliaferro, and Thurman described at least one experience where they heard or had to respond to the assumption that the HBTI they served was deficient in some way. Thurman said one individual external to the HBTI called the graduate school "the high school of seminaries."

Though previous inquiries highlighted the assumption of institutional inferiority among HBTIs (Wheeler et al., 2006), those studies did not extricate where such ideology arose. Initially, I believed HBTI presidents only dealt with the assumption of inferiority from sources external to the HBTI. This study, like previous studies on HBTIs, agreed with that assumption. HBTI presidents did experience the presumption of institutional inferiority from sources external to the HBTI.

However, this study also found that HBTI presidents worked to address the ideology of inferiority from sources internal to HBTIs. That was startling. Each president seemed to have to do more work to combat the feelings of inferiority among internal stakeholders of HBTIs than with people outside the institution. Thurman responded to the challenges of fighting this reality by saying, "White supremacy is a hell of a drug, but internalized oppression – that may be the worst drug out here."

**Strength-Based HBTI Narratives**

In addition to countering narratives of HBTI deficiency, HBTI presidents spoke to the need to provide strength-based reports on historically Black theological education. This mirrored literature calling for HBTIs, its constituents, and Black communities to critically engage its purpose and intent (Earl, 2006; Franklin, 2007). Thurman shared a poignant observation that he has not only had to "defend" historically Black theological education; he has had to "reframe" conversations about historically Black theological education. Like Thurman, each participant spoke towards reframing people's understanding of HBTIs and the HBTI president.

For instance, in previous literature, scholars detailed the challenges Black students experience while attending PWTIs (Beach, 1986; Wilmore, 1987). Taliaferro addressed this challenge's inverse by speaking about HBTIs as places that affirmed Black people. What emerged from the collective conversations surrounding the need to reframe thoughts about HBTIs was the idea that HBTIs and its presidents value and validate Black people's experiences, presence, and learning every day of the year. As one president stated, "HBCUs have a first-class commitment to the Black community that no other institutions have."

I wrestled with making sense of one presidents' distinction between being an HBTI and being an institution that is simply more diverse than PWTIs. When probed, the president made a clear distinction between being a historically Black educational institution and being an institution that has grown to be more diverse than other predominately White educational institutions. The president added that at least 30% of

the student body self-identifies as White students, and at least 50% of its faculty identified as White faculty persons. I retrospectively wondered about the effects of being a student of an HBTI where at least 50% of its professors identify as White professors.

## Cultivating Transformation (Theme 3)

### Up from Here

Previous literature identified at least four broad challenges faced by HBTIs: dealing with institutional isolation, combating institutional deficiency narratives, overcoming the notion that survival is successful, and arguing for the need for HBTIs existence (Brown, 2013; Earl, 2006; Wheeler et al., 2006). Each president was consistent in identifying challenges that they and their respective institutions faced. However, they were also clear about how they worked to mitigate those challenges.

While literature did well to identify many of the challenges faced by HBTIs and their leadership, little research shared how HBTIs and their presidents addressed those challenges. This study found that HBTI presidents actively sought solutions to problems that challenged the HBTI they served. HBTI presidents acted as resolution oriented change agents. Howard was an exemplar of this idea, as he described himself picking up trash, trimming the hedges, and purchasing the riding lawnmower for the institution. Another participant expressed his desire for HBTI member's to become prophetic problem-solvers. HBTI presidents did not negate the fact that there were challenges faced by HBTIs. However, their experiences showed how they engaged them.

### It's Not About Me

A small body of literature described HBTIs as institutions providing resources that money cannot buy (Costen, 1984; Van Dusen, 2018). This study mirrored the findings from that body of literature. It showed that the institution was broader than just the president and the president's decision making. These HBTI presidents were not dictators; they valued the presence, experience, and leadership of the HBTI community. Each president defined HBTIs, and by extension HBCUs, as priceless centers of learning. Taliaferro cogently described the priceless quality of HBTIs as an ability to share an unwavering commitment to Black people.

This study also found that HBTI presidents recognized HBTIs as places where faculty, staff, and students knew they were more than numbers. Each president echoed the sentiment that professors, advisors, administrators, and staff from HBTIs strive to provide support and care to their academic community. In the end, the narratives shared by each participant painted a picture that HBTIs were places that cared about its people, their aspirations, and the communities they represented.

## Taking Steps, Making Moves (Theme 4)

### Start Now

These three presidents' collective insights agreed with previous studies that called for HBTIs and HBCUs to reassess its business as usual philosophy, which often stifles its ability to thrive (Earl, 2006; Franklin, 2007). As study participants expressed, HBTI leaders cannot afford to view institutional survival as the ultimate aim. Instead, HBTIs must work to develop new models of leadership that create an ethos of thriving. To move beyond a survival as success ethic to an ethos of success only (Earl, 2006), HBTIs and its

presidents must reassess its purpose, mission, and academic and administrative leadership. Foundationally, presidents pointed to the need for courageous efforts among presidents and their constituents to create new educational models that transform people, communities, and lives.

One president pointed explicitly to the need for an overhaul of HBTIs. After becoming an HBTI president, Thurman advised the Board of Trustees, "if our mission and vision will have a future, this institution needs to be overhauled from top to bottom. And by top, I mean the board. By the bottom, I mean everything else." Admittedly, such leadership takes courage and vision. However, each participant exemplified a commitment to such a transformation.

**Plan the Work, Work the Plan**

The last theme articulated by each president was the need to plan the work of the HBTI while also finding a way to bring that plan to life. The small body of literature that examines HBTIs and their presidents has not engaged this theme. Nonetheless, participants agreed that HBTIs and their presidents must work together to create a future steeped in holistic excellence. Howard contended that to transform HBTIs, HBTIs have to get people and organizations to sing the institution's song. Another president discussed how the institution he served must first let go of Eurocentric administration and education models to understand their educational and administrative model. Only then can the HBTI truly work toward the liberation of its people.

It was fascinating to reflect upon how HBTI presidents spoke about a vision that incorporated an entire academic community. When speaking, HBTI presidents did not

cast a vision for the future in a silo. They included the voices and experiences of the whole institution. Resultantly, this theme found that success among these presidents did not hinge on individual success but the success of an entire community.

## Black Men in the Academy

The insights and stories shared by each president mirrored Harper's (2012) anti-deficit model, which focuses specific attention on Black male success in higher education rather than factors that limit Black male success. Like McGowan et al.'s (2015) research that highlighted the positive narratives of Black men at all levels of the academy, study participants provided stories that may encourage success, personal and professional resiliency, and hope among Black men in higher education. Narratives of hope, resiliency, and success should be available to Black men and others desirous of pursuing excellence in higher education and beyond.

Unlike previous literature, this study also touched upon Black male leaders' use of critical spirituality and its influence on their leadership styles, visions, and aspirations. There has been some research on the role spirituality has played in the retention and success of Black male undergraduate students (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno, 2003). However, research remains scant on the role that critical spirituality plays in Black administrative leaders' lives. This study showed that these participants used spirituality to enhance their leadership capacity, connect with constituents, and reflect upon their personal and professional lives.

## Implications for Practice

Though focused on HBTIs and their leadership, this study is intended for every individual desiring to expand their leadership capacity. This study's findings will help any leader desiring to become a more courageous, conscientious, and communal leader. As it relates to HBTIs and their leadership, I offer four significant implications: (1) cultivate a new generation of HBTI leaders; (2) develop mentoring relationships among HBTI presidents; (3) expand the body of literature dedicated to HBTIs and their presidents; and (4) further develop critical spirituality as a leadership framework in and beyond educational enterprises. These implications are shared below.

**Cultivate a New Generation of HBTI Leaders**

This study shines a light on the leadership practices and experiences of three presidents of HBTIs. One consistent point identified among these HBTI presidents was creating a leadership incubator for potential HBTI presidents. One president said about leadership development for potential HBTI presidents, "My dad always told me, I can tell you what you think about the people that you're going to serve by how well you prepare to serve them." His words pointed to a need for potential leaders of HBTIs to have the resources available to prepare, engage, and develop their understanding of leadership at HBTIs.

Second, HBTI leaders and former leaders should invest energy in developing a new generation of leaders. During an interview with the most age mature participant in this study, a conversation emerged about HBTIs problem with identifying and installing a new president once the former president leaves, retires, or resigns. In his description of the problem, the president alluded to the reality that HBTIs have a presidential succession

problem resulting in the need for a "succession plan." Identifying and creating a pool of promising, potential presidential leaders and pouring resources into those individuals may prove indispensable to the life of HBTIs. Additionally, current and former HBTI leaders aware of the opportunities and challenges of HBTIs can be an essential voice in preparing those potential leaders. Developing a leadership program for potential HBTI leaders may expand the leadership capacity of HBTIs and stabilize HBTIs in the future.

**Develop Mentoring Relationships with Current and Former Presidents**

Closely related to a leadership program for potential HBTI leaders is a need for mentoring relationships among current HBTI presidents. All the participants in this study spoke to the need for presidential mentorship. One recommendation is for HBTI presidents to create a network of current and former HBTI presents. However, mentoring relationships do not need to be exclusive to current or former presidents of HBTIs. As one president in this study suggested, mentoring relationships can come from multiple sources. While there is a lack of literature detailing the effect of mentoring relationships on the presidential success of HBTIs, HBTI presidents indicated mentorship was a healthy and viable resource.

**Expand the Body of Literature on HBTIs and its Leadership**

There is an absence of literature focused on presidential leadership in graduate theological education. That void creates potential barriers of knowledge for current seminary presidents desiring resources to increase their leadership capabilities. This study adds to the research on HBTIs and theological education in general. However, more research needs to focus on graduate theological schools – especially HBTIs. This

study generated additional questions to further research on HBTIs. For example, what are alumni of HBTIs doing professionally? How are alumni influencing the world? What are the experiences of professors of HBTIs? Or, what are the experiences of receptionists or custodians or the grounds crew of HBTIs? All of these are pertinent questions worth pursuing. This study also urges theological schools to encourage the development of research on graduate theological education.

**Develop Critical Spirituality as a Leadership Framework**

Critical spirituality is a leadership framework that can enhance *any* leader's leadership capabilities and competencies, not just HBTI leaders or educational leaders in P-12 contexts. Previous studies have only used critical spirituality to understand principals' roles in primary education settings (Dantley, 2010; McCray, Beachum, & Yawn, 2012; Scanlan, 2011). This study found that leaders in any sector can use critical spirituality to develop their leadership capacity. Dantley's (2005) framework invites leaders to participate in the sacred task of genuine and honest self-reflection that leads to institutional transformation. It charges leaders to assess their actions and their effect on individuals, teams, and institutions.

Second, individuals interested in leadership theories should not confine this framework to a specific faith background, religious tradition, or ideology. The assumption made within this research was that HBTI presidents utilized spirituality within their life and leadership. That assumption proved correct. However, this study found that critical spirituality examined more than HBTI presidents' faith backgrounds. Critical spirituality helped leaders understand their thoughts, actions, and responses to

leadership's organizational demands by inviting them to reflect, deconstruct, participate, and transform themselves, others, and institutions.

## Recommendations for Future Research

My analysis of three HBTI presidents' lived experiences provoked additional questions that this study did not have the time or intent to answer. Resultantly, I share five recommendations for future research on HBTIs. Those five recommendations are: (1) research womyn presidents of HBTIs; (2) increase research focused on HBTIs and its leadership; (3) offer a strength-based approach to research on HBTIs; (4) explore HBTIs educational and leadership models; and (5) expand research on critical spirituality. I expound on these recommendations below.

### Research Womyn Presidents of HBTIs

This study would have benefited from the voices, perspectives, or experiences of womyn presidents of HBTIs. Despite the researcher's best intention to recruit womyn who were/are HBTI presidents, only one was identified as a potential study participant. The seeming lack of womyn present within this study leads to additional questions. For instance, what are the lived experiences of womyn serving as presidents of HBTIs and other graduate theological schools? And, what can be attributed to the seeming lack of womyn in presidential leadership roles at HBTIs and graduate theological institutions in general?"

If HBTIs are to remain true to their mental and physical liberation mission, it must seriously address its seeming lack of womyn at the highest rung of leadership. Research exploring HBTI leaders' experiences must also work diligently to include the

voices of womyn within its understanding of leadership. Diminishing the voices of womyn leaders is a detriment to HBTIs, theological education in general, and society. Simply put, more research focused on the experiences of womyn at HBTIs is needed.

**Expand the Research on Men who are HBTI Presidents**

This study allowed the researcher to peer into the experiences of three men who have served as presidents of HBTIs. While this study gives a snapshot of HBTI leadership as described by these three men, more research should engage the experiences of HBTI presidents who describe themselves as men. What are the experiences of Black men who serve as presidents of PWTIs? How do men understand their role as presidents of theological schools? These questions, and more, must be probed to develop a more comprehensive image of presidential leadership in graduate theological education.

**Increase Research on HBTIs and its Leadership**

One HBTI president stated that this study was the first study inviting him to share his experiences as an HBTI president. That was alarming. The HBTI president's words pointed to the need for more research on HBTIs and its leadership. As stated previously, research focused on HBTIs is limited. An even smaller amount of literature focuses on the experiences of presidents of HBTIs. Research on HBTIs, its presidents, faculty, and student body may assist future researchers, leaders, faculty, and staff with a more robust understanding and image of these historically Black graduate theological institutions. Research of this nature will not only expand the literature base on HBTIs; it will open a door for individuals to learn from and propel HBTIs forward.

**Provide Strength-Based Research**

Researchers should consider sharing strength-based narratives of HBTIs and their presidents, not just its deficiencies. Let me be clear: the participants in this study identified several challenges about their work as HBTI presidents. However, their conversations quickly pivoted from the difficulties of leading HBTIs to the opportunity to stand as resolution-oriented change agents. A strength-based approach to administrative leadership research can provoke leaders to excel despite obstacles, no matter where they sit in a company's organizational chart.

**Exploring HBTIs Educational and Administrative Leadership Models**

What is the educational and administrative leadership model of HBTIs? In Chapter Two, I looked at HBTIs mission statements – which often centered on Africentric models of education and leadership – to identify some of the educational and institutional aims of HBTIs. In Chapter Four, HBTI presidents spoke about HBTIs as organizations striving to offer a model of administrative and academic leadership that speaks to its constituents' needs. Clarifying those new models may help HBTIs focus their energy and resources on a common goal.

**Expand Research on Critical Spirituality in Higher Education and Beyond**

This study focused on HBTI presidents and their use of critical spirituality. To my knowledge, this is the first study that engaged Dantley's (2005) critical spirituality framework within higher education. As the study participants showed, critical spirituality involved more than an assessment of individuals' religious experiences. Critical spirituality is a sacred task that invites leaders to recognize how individual thoughts and actions can oppress and compromise others' freedom. It is also a framework that allows

researchers to analyze how individuals respond to systems and organizations that stifle their humanity. Ultimately, more research needs to be conducted through this framework's lens to behold its worth.

## Conclusion

*I am a graduate of the Morehouse School of Religion at The Interdenominational Theological Center. Though unknown to many individuals, this institution positively impacted my life. Attending the Morehouse School of Religion at The Interdenominational Theological Center allowed me to sit with and learn from mostly Black professors whose research agenda and coursework centered upon the experiences of Black people and other minoritized groups. Sitting in HBTI faculty and administrators' classrooms and offices genuinely helped me sense the significance of the HBTI and the need for research focused on leadership and HBTIs. One vivid classroom experience at The Interdenominational Theological Center stands out for me.*

*It was my first day of class as a student at The Morehouse School of Religion at The Interdenominational Theological Center. I experienced many firsts that day. It was the first time I experienced a classroom where Black people were the majority. It was the first time I had a Black professor. And, it was the first time I had ever seen, or experienced, or called a Black person "doctor." I was twenty-four years old. I was in awe. Seeing my reflection in the faces of my professors, classmates, and academic leadership made my soul smile. I was in a place that felt like home, though I had never experienced the space before. I experienced another first that day. I got kicked out of*

*class. We all got kicked out of class. My first Black professor in life kicked us out of class because we had not read about nor watched the city's news.*

*Before kicking us out of class, the professor made a statement that captivated me. While dismissing the group of students, the professor said, "The knowledge you gain here is for a purpose. If nothing else, you need to read; to know what is happening in the world around you." Then he said, "I want to know what you are going to do with my people – big mamma and daddy, my children, and the unborn well of brownness yet to be realized. I want to know that you care enough about my people to listen with them, to learn from them, to help them, us, and yourselves, thrive." His words, "What are you going to do with my people," influence why I have engaged in this research.*

Throughout this study, I have shined a light on HBTIs and their presidents. Without question, this research would not have come to life without the authentic, courageous, and thought-provoking responses of the three participants in this project. Their stories provided an untold narrative within theological education research. In chapter one, I began with a statement of resilience from the president of an HBTI. I conclude this study as it started: by sharing the words offered by each HBTI president who participated in this study. During the final interview with each president, I asked: what is the gift of historically Black theological education and its leadership? Howard responded,

> I think Black theological education is essential. I think the Black Seminary and The Black Church have helped America fulfill its promises of being a place that's the land of the free and the home of the brave. It is The Black Church that pushed

> the larger culture to be authentic and not to be hypocritical. The Black Church and The Black Seminary are still a needed vehicle for advocacy for, as [theologian Howard] Thurman called it, the disinherited, and the people left behind.

Thurman stated,

> I think about [HBTIs] not just as a Black theological school, but as a Black institution that has the capacity to be a conduit for the movement of people, ideas, and resources for the sake of the flourishing of Black people – and that being in a diasporic sense, not just domestic.

Finally, Taliaferro explained,

> The reason why it's important to have Black presidents – Black seminary presidents, and just Black presidents of higher education, in general – is that you send a message that Black people are not only good enough to be taught, but they're smart enough to lead as well. And they're smart enough to teach.

I encourage researchers, students, and administrators to contribute to the literature base on HBTIs and their presidents. My challenge for each of us is that in reflecting on HBTIs, its administration, students, and campuses, we develop a lens for seeing and articulating its strengths, influential contributions, and significance – not just for Black people and the Black community, but to the world.

# APPENDICES

# Appendix A

## Clemson University IRB Approval

CLEMSON UNIVERSITY

Sharad Creasman <screasm@g.clemson.edu>

**Exempt Determination for IRB2020-092: Soulful Leadership: Critical Spirituality...**

2 messages

**Nalinee Patin** <npatin@clemson.edu> Wed, Apr 29, 2020 at 8:32 AM
To: Natasha N Croom <nncroom@clemson.edu>
Cc: "screasm@g.clemson.edu" <screasm@g.clemson.edu>

Dear Dr. Croom:

The Clemson University Office of Research Compliance reviewed the protocol titled **"Soulful Leadership: Critical Spirituality and the Experiences of Black Presidents at Historically Black Theological Institutions"** and a determination was made on April 29, 2020 that the proposed activities involving human participants qualify as **Exempt under category 2** in accordance with federal regulations 45 CFR 46.104(d), http://media.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/new_exempt_categories.pdf.

This IRB protocol was approved during modified university operations. This approval does not grant permission to utilize university facilities, and researchers are required to follow safety protocols for facilities not affiliated with Clemson. **All in-person data collection should be suspended unless deemed essential by the Vice President for Research or the university returns to normal operations.** Contact your Associate Dean for Research if you feel your project should be classified as essential.

**No further action or IRB oversight of the protocol is required except in the following situations:**

1. Substantial changes made to the protocol that could potentially change the review level. If you plan to make changes to your project, please send an email to IRB@clemson.edu outlining the nature of the changes prior to implementation of those changes. The IRB office will determine whether or not your proposed changes require additional review.
2. Occurrence of unanticipated problem or adverse event; any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects, complications, and/or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Research Compliance immediately.
3. Change in Principal Investigator (PI)

All research involving human participants must maintain an ethically appropriate standard, which serves to protect the rights and welfare of the participants. This involves obtaining informed consent and maintaining confidentiality of data. Research related records should be retained for a minimum of three (3) years after completion of the study.

The Clemson University IRB is committed to facilitating ethical research and protecting the rights of human subjects. Please contact us if you have any questions and use the IRB number and title when referencing the study in future correspondence.

All the best,

Nalinee

## Appendix B

## Participation Invitation Letter

Dear President,

My name is Sharad Creasman. I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership – Higher Education Program at Clemson University.

I am requesting your participation in a doctoral research study that reflects upon the experiences of Black seminary presidents, and their use of spirituality to (a) overcome personal and professional obstacles; (b) challenge assumptions of institutional inferiority and deficiency, and (c) engage in the struggle for physical and psychological freedom for Black seminary constituents and the communities they serve.

The study involves completing three informal interviews lasting approximately forty-five minutes per session. Each interview is intended to: (a) capture a snapshot of your thoughts and perspectives on being a president of a historically Black seminary, and (b) understand the role spirituality has played in your life and leadership. Your responses to each question will be kept strictly confidential. Each interview will be assigned a number code to ensure that any personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write up the findings.

There is no compensation for participating in this study. However, your participation will be a valuable addition to the research and findings, which could lead to greater public understanding of historically Black theological education, their impact on religious life in the United States, and show a model of leadership that will help current and future institutional leaders confidently use spirituality to engage the institutions and people they serve.

If you are willing to participate, please suggest a day and time convenient for you to discuss this project's scope and select dates you can meet via Zoom, Skype, or other online platforms. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask. Participation is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time.

Please review the Informed Consent letter attached to this message if you would like to participate in the study. Your participation in the research will provide a positive lens for viewing historically Black theological education and expand the literature base on Historically Black Theological Institutions.

Thank you for your time and participation.

Appendix C

Informed Consent

Information about Being in a Research Study
Clemson University

## Soulful Leadership: Critical Spirituality and the Experiences of Black Presidents at Historically Black Theological Institutions

**KEY INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY**

**Voluntary Consent:** Natasha N. Croom, Ph.D., an Assistant Professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs at Clemson University, is inviting you to volunteer for a research study. Sharad H. Creasman, a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership program at Clemson University, will be assisting in this research.

**Alternative to Participation:** As an alternative to taking part in this study, you can help by connecting us with any person(s) who are current or former presidents of an HBTI who identify as a Black person.

You will not be punished in any way if you decide not to be in the study or to stop taking part in the study.

**Study Purpose:** The purpose of this research is to reflect upon the experiences of Black presidents and their use of spirituality to overcome personal and professional obstacles, challenge assumptions of institutional inferiority and deficiency, and engage in the struggle for physical and psychological freedom for Historically Black Theological Institutions (HBTIs) constituents and the communities they serve.

**Activities and Procedures:** Your part in the study will be to complete one participant survey and three confidential interviews utilizing an internet based platform such as Skype, Zoom, or Google Meet. Each interview will ask questions related to your use of spirituality and your experiences as an HBTI president.

**Participation Time:** 3.5 hours total.

**Risks and Discomforts:** We do not know of any risks or discomforts to you in this research study.

**Possible Benefits:** You may not benefit directly from taking part in this study, however your insights will: (a) increase the literature on Historically Black theological education and its leadership; (b) provide narratives of hope, achievement, resiliency, faith, and

success; stories that have too often been neglected within Black seminary discourse; and (c) compel people to holistically invest more deeply into the existence of HBTIs.

**EXCLUSION/INCLUSION REQUIREMENTS**

In order to participate in the study, participants must identify as a Black person who is/was a president of an HBTI within the last 10 years.

**AUDIO/VIDEO RECORDING AND PHOTOGRAPHS**

Each session will utilize audio recording. Recordings will remain strictly confidential. Only the pimary investigator (PI) and the member of the PIs team will have access to recordings. Data will be stored on a secured Clemson network. Recordings will not be shared with the public or other participants in the study.

**PROTECTION OF PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY**

The results of this study may be published in scientific journals, professional publications, or educational presentations.

Identifiable information collected during the study will be removed and the de-identified information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from the participants or legally authorized representative.

**CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights in this research study, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) at 864-656-0636 or irb@clemson.edu. If you are outside of the Upstate South Carolina area, please use the ORC's toll-free number, 866-297-3071. The Clemson IRB will not be able to answer some study-specific questions. However, you may contact the Clemson IRB if the research staff cannot be reached or if you wish to speak with someone other than the research staff.

If you have any study related questions or if any problems arise, please contact Sharad H. Creasman at Clemson University at screasm@g.clemson.edu or (404) 786-8644.

**CONSENT**

**By participating in the study, you indicate that you have read the information written above, been allowed to ask any questions, and you are voluntarily choosing to take part in this research. You do not give up any legal rights by taking part in this research study.**

Appendix D

Participant Survey

**Demographic Information**

1) How do you identify racially?
    - Black: ____
    - African American: ____
    - Caribbean American: _____
    - Multiracial: _____
    - Biracial: _____
    - Other (please write in): _____
2) I am:
    - 31-40 years old
    - 41-50 years old
    - 51-60 years old
    - 61-70 years old
    - 71+ years old
3) Gender:
    - Woman ____
    - Man ____
    - Other (please write in):_____
4) Were you born in the U.S.?
    - Yes
    - No
5) Where do you currently live? City: _____ State: _____

**Religious/Faith Background**

6) What is your current religious affiliation?
    - Christian (Protestant)

- What is your denominational affiliation?

  _____

  - Christian (Catholic)
  - Nonreligious
  - Muslim
  - Buddhist
  - Other _____

7) Are you ordained? Yes or No
8) If ordained, what denomination are you ordained by? _____

**Professional Life**

9) Is this your first presidency?
   - Yes
   - No
10) How many presidencies have you held throughout your career?
   - 1
   - 2
   - 3
   - 4 or more
11) How many cumulative years have you served as a president at a Black seminary?
   - 1-5 years
   - 5-10 years
   - 10-15 years
   - 15-20 years
   - 20 years or more
12) What was your last professional role before assuming the position of seminary president?
   - Interim President
   - Chief Academic Officer / Provost

- Chief Officer of Advancement / Development
- Chief Executive for Diversity
- Dean
- Outside of Higher Education
- Other _____

**Education:**

13) What is your highest earned degree?
    - Bachelor's Degree
    - Master's Degree
    - Professional Doctorate (i.e., Doctor of Ministry)
    - Advanced Research Degree
        - Ph.D.
        - Ed.D.
        - Th.D.

14) What academic discipline did you earn your highest degree in?
    - Higher Education
    - Religion
        - Ethics
        - Theology
        - Sociology of Religion
        - Biblical Studies
        - Other _____
    - African American Studies
    - Other _____

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. We truly value the information you have provided. Your responses will contribute to our research focused on leadership at Historically Black Theological Institutions.

If you have any comments about this survey or the project, please don't hesitate to ask us at screasm@g.clemson.edu.

Once again, we are incredibly grateful for your time, honesty, and thoughtfulness in completing this survey.

Many thanks,

HBTI Research Team

## Appendix E

## Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

**Demographics**

1. Briefly describe the institution you serve and the surrounding community. Are there any significant descriptors that are most important to understand your community?
2. Describe your pathway to the presidency?
3. How long have you been in education? How long have you been a president? How long have you been a president at your current institution?

**Background**

1. Do you consider yourself to be spiritual/religious? Why/How? Can you share examples?
2. What is the difference between spirituality and religion? How do you define each?
3. Were you religious/spiritual as a child? Please share early memories. Were your parents/grandparents religious? Was there a religious/ spiritual tradition in your family?
4. Why did you become an educator? Why did you become a president/administrator?
5. What do you believe is the core mission of education/schooling at an HBTI?
6. How do you articulate your leadership beliefs? How do you define yourself as a leader?

7. Do you believe that leaders can separate their emotions, personal beliefs/values, and cultural experiences from leadership practice?

**Religion/Spirituality and Daily Role of Principal**

1. Do you lead with/through your religion/spirituality? How? Please share examples.
2. Do you seek spiritual guidance (or prayer for guidance) as you carry out your leadership duties? Please describe.
3. Do you have any outward displays of your religion/spirituality (i.e., cross necklace, Bible, religious bumper sticker, religious quotes, saying "Amen" or "preach")?
4. Have you ever felt the need to hide your spirituality/religion in your work school? Please explain.
5. How do you identify fellow spiritual leaders? Do you support one another? How?
6. How do you connect with those in your school communities?
7. What is your most important task/role as a school leader?

**Religion/Spirituality and Self**

1. Has your spirituality/religion enhanced your leadership skills? How?
2. Would you describe yourself as a resilient person? How/Why? Does your spirituality/religion contribute to this? Is religion/spirituality a sustaining force during challenging times?
3. Does your spirituality/religion contribute to your health and wellbeing? How?
4. Would you describe yourself as an activist? Or an advocate? Please explain and share examples.

5. Do you have a leadership plan for the future? Does it include some transformation for your school?

Interview Protocol modified from Newcomb & Khan (2014).

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