Making it Out Da Hood: Spiritual Retreat Encounters, which promote Resilience and Spirituality among African American Adolescents and Young Adults

Abstract:
Mainstream media portrays African American adolescents and young adults as “other” because they come from broken homes, incarcerated parents, drug- or gang-infested communities as misfits, dropouts, hopeless causes, “thugs” to be feared, and so much more. I want to break that stereotype and bring to light African American young adults who have graduated from high school, matriculated to college, traveled abroad, received advanced degrees, and undertaken successful professional careers. Therefore, according to social scientists, these adolescents would be considered “resilient” against the deleterious conditions in which they lived. This study highlights the lived experiences of African American young adults who through an ethnographic research study shared their lived experience of growing up in the inner city and attended annual spiritual retreats all four years of high school while participating in a college readiness scholarship program in the Chicagoland area.

Introduction
Most college readiness programs provide services designed to counter negative school and community influences by helping students seek, prepare for, and obtain college degrees. These programs offer a series of interventions that emphasize academic preparedness, help students develop college aspirations, and assist them in setting realistic college expectations.¹ Many qualitative and quantitative studies have examined college readiness of first-generation, low-income students. But, most studies focus on the personal characteristics of the students rather than learned behaviors.² There is a lack of literature that reports the effectiveness of spiritual formation in conjunction with college readiness for low-income, inner-city African American adolescents. Therefore, the focus of this paper is to discuss research conducted on one college readiness program in the Chicagoland area, which incorporated spiritual development for low to middle income, African American students who attended a Catholic High School.


From 1995 through 2008, I was the spiritual retreat facilitator for Agape Scholars Program (ASP) where I conducted the one day and weekend long spiritual retreats. This study highlights how spirituality impacted the lived experiences of thirty-nine African American young adults who, as teenagers, had participated in ASP’s spiritual retreats across all four years of high school. As a Christian educator, the focus of this study was to answer the following question: How does a college readiness scholarship program’s spiritual development component assist in developing the resilience of urban African American high school students? I explored the effectiveness of the ASP’s spiritual retreats through an ethnographic research project that included social media (a secret Facebook page), structured interviews (face to face or Skype), pilot/focus groups, and a Google Form survey. Therefore, this study can assist Christian educators, community and church leaders gain an understanding of how to promote resilience with low income African American youth and young adults through the sacred space of spiritual retreats.

Context and Background

This study examined, Agape Scholars Program (ASP), a college readiness scholarship program for low to middle income African American high school students living in the inner city of Chicago. ASP required all students (called Scholars) to attend a spiritual retreat all four years of high school. My experience with the Scholars, was marked by highs and lows. My heart holds dearly four alumni who, because of tragic events, are no longer here and did not become the successful adults that they desired to be. Two young men were killed on the streets of Chicago. One was killed two weeks before heading to a top-ten college with a full-ride pre-medicine scholarship. He was shot after bad communication between him and a group of other young men. The other was a junior in college who came home for a family visit, but was shot due to gang violence. Another young man was a senior at an Ivy League college and preparing for graduation, but the stress overcame him and he committed suicide. One young woman was diagnosed with cancer while in high school; her battle ended a few years later. I remember them constantly and think about how their lives were gone too soon and wonder the impact they would have made on this world. However, I have had the pleasure to stay in contact with many other Scholars who are now young adults.

These scholars, similar to many African American youth and adolescents in the inner city of Chicago live in adverse environments within their neighborhoods. Poverty, neglect, abandonment, parental stress, neighborhood violence, poor education, discord, and abuse are commonplace for too many children. Despite this reality, however, many overcome the odds to experience academic success, personal well-being, and healthy social relationships, therefore, being considered resilient. However, their participation with ASP provided for them a safe and sacred place through spiritual development, college preparedness initiatives, tutoring, and mentorship, which assisted them to have a successful transition into adulthood.

The term resilience implies a history of successful adaptation and positive development, or the demonstration of competence in an individual who has experienced adverse experiences or stressful life events. Resilience as a phenomenon is associated in the literature with protective factors, protective processes, and competence. Protective factors insulate one from harm, while protective processes are tools and resources that one draws upon to overcome risk or avoid risk all together.

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3 Names of research participants and organization have been changed for confidentiality.
4 Werner and Smith, Overcoming the Odds.
I believe that religion and spirituality can have a significant role to play in resilience. Therefore, exploring how Agape Scholars Program (ASP) provided spiritual development through annual spiritual retreats allowed me to begin to examine the role of religious and spiritual development in resilience for the “Scholars.”

**Spirituality and Resilience**

African American adolescents have identified that spirituality and religion are important factors in their lives. Religious and spiritual involvement have been found to be buffers or resiliency factors for African American children at a high risk for poor adjustment. Resilience is determined by an individual’s sense of meaning and purpose about his or her life and a sense of hope for his or her future, which from a theological perspective is a form of spirituality. Spirituality is formed by one’s sense of connection with God, others (family, friends, mentors, etc.), and nature. It is through relationships with others—whether individual or collective—that there is a sense of safety, peace, support, validation, and identity development.

This study highlights the lived experiences of 39 African American young adults between twenty-two and thirty-five years of age for whom I facilitated annual spiritual retreats during all four years of high school. All these young adults attended Catholic high schools and were academic scholars in Agape Scholars Program. For over twenty years, I had the opportunity to spend twenty-four to forty-eight hours with predominantly African American adolescents and young adults, many of whom lived in or came from inner-city impoverished communities. These few hours away from their home life, community, peers, and school seemingly provided a safe, sacred space for spiritual and identity development. Despite living in communities that lacked resources, many of them filled with poverty, crime, drugs, gangs, violence, low performing public schools, teen pregnancy, single-parent homes, incarcerated parents, and substance abuse, I was able to witness within these adolescents and young adults a sense of tenacity, resistance, empowerment, strength, hope, and perseverance to break out from what they experienced on a daily basis.

The presence of religion in one’s life has been found to be a significant protective resource against maladaptive adjustment outcomes among various adolescent samples. For instance, research in this area has documented that there is an association between church attendance or self-defined religiosity and lower levels of distress and worry, lower rates and later onset of sexual intercourse, and better adjustment and life satisfaction. Studies that have investigated religiosity as a protective mechanism for at-risk adolescent samples found that religion fostered resilient outcomes.

Researchers working with African American adults have concluded that religious beliefs and practices provide a meaningful context within which these individuals interpret and respond

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to both life’s hardships and its joys.\textsuperscript{8} This research has indicated that Black Americans are typically very involved in religion and religious activities, and that religion has historically been important in the lives of Black Americans.\textsuperscript{9}

More research has been conducted into the relationship between religiosity and adolescent functioning in three areas: sexual behavior, self-esteem, and general psychological functioning. Previous studies have demonstrated that greater religious attendance and beliefs, as well as involvement in community church groups, were associated with later onset of sexual intercourse or a decreased likelihood to engage in sexual intercourse.\textsuperscript{10} Specifically, a review of research in this area conducted by Bernard Spika, Ralph Hood, and Richard Gorsuch indicates that religiosity may decrease the likelihood of intercourse in adolescents by as much as 50%.\textsuperscript{11} Fewer studies have been conducted that specifically studied religiosity among African American adolescents. Those that exist, however, have found mixed results. Some have found that low religiosity, defined as low religious community affiliation and overall low religious feeling, is a significant risk factor for early sexual debut among African American adolescents,\textsuperscript{12} particularly among females.\textsuperscript{13} Conversely, others, including Leo Hendricks, Diane Robinson-Brown, and Lawrence Gary,\textsuperscript{14} failed to find a significant relationship between religiosity—defined as a general sense of religiousness—and sexual attitudes or behaviors in Black adolescents. Once again, however, the extent of generalizability of the findings from many of these studies is not yet known due to several factors such as the utilization of small sample sizes of African American participants, samples from rural areas, and/or participants primarily from middle class families.\textsuperscript{15}

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Research Methodology

The research methodology consisted of ethnographic qualitative research through semi-structured interviews either face to face or via Skype, focus/pilot groups, and creation of a secret Facebook page and Google Form survey. As well as an interdisciplinary literature review of social scientist, Christian Educators, and theologians whose research focused on the topic(s) of resilience, African American spirituality, and/or the role of the Black Church in the community. There is a lack of literature that reports the effectiveness of spiritual formation in conjunction with college readiness for low-income, inner-city African American adolescents. To join the secret Facebook page, individuals had to be added by the administrator (myself as the researcher) or invited by a member with the permission of the administrator. Only those who are current or former members of the Facebook page can see its name, description, and tags, or find it through a search. Only current members of the page can see who is in the group, read member posts, and view stories about the group on Facebook (e.g., in the news feed or through a search). Facebook was a viable means of recruitment for this qualitative research study because I had maintained a social media relationship with many of the ASP alumni after they graduated from high school. Therefore, sampling and recruitment was not a challenge. Kapp, Peters, and Oliver describe social media (Facebook) as an innovative and convenient means to recruit participants.\textsuperscript{16} Other researchers have described social media as a useful tool for recruitment of a small sample.\textsuperscript{17}

Retreats – Spiritual Foundation

One of the most unique components of Agape Scholars Program (ASP) is its spiritual foundation. The program was started by a Catholic priest and has a Catholic foundation. Scholars who are accepted into this four-year college readiness program are not required to be Catholic, but they must attend a Catholic or private high school within the Chicagoland area. To fulfill the spiritual formation requirements, scholars attend teen masses and annual spiritual retreats all four years of high school. While the teen masses were important, my focus for this research project was only on the impact of the spiritual retreats.

As the retreat facilitator from 1995 through 2008, I was responsible (along with my colleagues) for planning and facilitating the spiritual retreats. ASP class size averaged eighty students, beyond the capacity of the local retreat center. Therefore, freshmen, sophomore, and junior year retreats involved only half the students at a time. However, senior year, all students came together for their final retreat as a class at a retreat center that was approximately two and a half hours away from Chicago.

Each spiritual retreat had a theme and a Scriptural reference. Below, I have listed the themes by class.

\textbf{Freshman Retreat} (Friday and Saturday)—Who Am I? (Jeremiah 29:11)—The purpose of this retreat was to help freshmen gain an understanding of who they were in Christ and to know that God had a purpose and plan for their lives as they transitioned into adolescents. Each student was given a personalized name card with their name, the


meaning of their name, and a Scripture reference. This helped the students to gain an understanding about their identity in Christ.

**Sophomore Retreat** (Friday and Saturday)—Choices and Consequences (Romans 12:1–2)—The purpose of this retreat was to help the sophomores gain an understanding about making their own decisions as they were reaching the legal age to drive and do things for themselves without their parents. Each student was given a journal, to teach them the importance of writing down their feelings and emotions as they encountered certain situations in their lives.

**Junior Retreat** (Friday through Sunday)—Family (1 Corinthians 13:4–8)—The purpose of this retreat was to help the juniors gain an understanding about the importance of family and the Love of Christ as they were beginning to transition into adulthood. The juniors were given letters written by adults in their life—family members, sponsors/mentors, ASP staff, and teachers. The purpose of the letters was to allow the adults to write positive things about the students and how they were proud of them. Students were also given a cross as a symbol of their relationship with Christ. They also took part in a Saturday service project either at a homeless shelter or nursing home. In addition, they attended a Sunday church service at a Catholic church near the retreat center.

**Senior Retreat** (Friday through Sunday)—Transitions (Ephesians 6:10–20)—The purpose of this retreat was to help the seniors gain an understanding about what was required of them as they transitioned from high school to college and to know that they were equipped with the Full Armor of God. Their whole senior class was together for the first time for a retreat. They went to a retreat center that was approximately two and a half hours away from Chicago, which was the farthest from home that many of the students had ever been. They were given a Bible as a symbol of the Word of God to take with them wherever they go.

**Spirituality Data Results—The Retreats, a Safe Place**

The twelve participants who completed face-to-face or individual Skype interviews were asked to reflect on their experience of participating with ASP. In addition, twenty-seven alumni responded to the Google Forms survey, using a Likert scale of strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree, evaluating four statements regarding their experience in ASP (see table 1). The purpose of the questions was to have alumni reflect on their teenage years and evaluate the effectiveness of the program in terms of its spiritual retreats, preparedness for college, academic achievement, and its importance in their high school years. In this section, my focus is only be on the impact of the spiritual retreats.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement requiring response (agree or disagree)</th>
<th>Number (percentage) of respondents</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The program was an important part of your high school years.</td>
<td>19 (79.5%)</td>
</tr>
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The spiritual retreats were an important part of your high school years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>22 (81.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>5 (18.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
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</tbody>
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The program prepared you to transition to college.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>11 (40.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>2 (7.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The program assisted you to succeed academically.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>19 (70.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>6 (22.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>2 (7.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

From table 1, I focus on the statement, “The spiritual retreats were an important part of your high school years.” This statement resulted in the highest rate of “strongly agree” responses (81.5%) of all the questions regarding their experience participating in ASP. In order to illuminate this experience, I draw from the interviews and the Google Forms survey. When asked during his interview, “What was the most influential component of your experience while participating in Agape Scholars Program?” Paul Jackson responded, “The spiritual retreats were the most influential part of my ASP experience. As teenagers, we were at the age of finding our identities. I feel that the retreats allowed us to come together spiritually.” Since the ASP scholars went to different Catholic high schools, the retreats were the only space (besides mandatory meetings or events) where they came together for a length of time (twenty-four or forty-eight hours) and could hear each other’s stories. Numerous scholars commented that the retreats were judgement free zones to share personal issues, as well as it was an opportunity for many of them to form bonds with their peers for whom many were living in similar neighborhoods. For many of them, the retreats were “a place to vent,” “think differently,” “express ourselves”, “was an open forum where we cried, laughed, acted, rolled our eyes” and “a lot of us lived in bad neighborhoods but the retreats allowed us to get away.”

The spiritual retreats also offered leadership development. During their junior or senior year, ASP scholars were given the opportunity to be “retreat leaders” for the freshmen and sophomore retreats. A few research participants reflected on the fact that they were able to find their voice and the retreats strengthened their relationship with God to deal with real life situations. Malcolm Gaston during his Skype interview passionately shared about being a retreat team leader. He recalled from memory leading a discussion about forgiving his father who was absent in his life. However, the highlight of his story centered on giving his life to Christ during the Catholic mass attended on last day of retreat. He stated,

So, I was sitting there (in the pew) with my head down, just kind of reflecting, when my best friend who was also a retreat leader came and tapped me on the shoulder and told me to go up there (the altar). I remember I began to start crying. So, I took the walk up the aisle and fell into the arms of the priest and he just embraced me as I cried. I had never experienced anything like that in my life, but it was life changing. Here I was supposed to be the retreat leader making an impact on the lives of the sophomores. I realized then that God was real in my life and I gave my life to Christ.

Paul Jackson reflected, “The spiritual retreats instilled Christian values that are needed to get us through our daily lives. As teenagers, we were at the age of finding our identities.” Hubert Wright commented, “I learned the spiritual tools needed to make informed decisions about my life.”
The spiritual retreats also cemented the involvement of adults in the research participants’ lives. In their interviews or the Google Forms survey, many respondents referenced letters or journals from the retreats as impactful in their lives. At the sophomore year retreat, ASP scholars were all given a journal to help them learn how to “be still, reflect, and regroup.” These journals became of significant importance to the participants. Throughout the retreat, they were given moments to reflect and write down their thoughts, and they are encouraged to continue the practice afterward. For the junior retreat, unbeknownst to ASP scholars, their parents, siblings, sponsors/mentors, and sometimes even teachers or coaches are asked to write letters to them, to be distributed on Saturday night after dinner. The purpose of these letters is for recipients to read positive words about themselves and to know how much they are loved. Some students may only get one letter, and others could get five or more, depending on who responded to the request. No matter the number of letters, this is an emotional time for the students as they begin to read the letters. In the interviews and the Google Forms survey, many research participants shared how these letters still impact them as adults. Sasha Jones during a focused group meeting stated, “Those journals taught me a lot about writing things down and how to connect that spiritually. The retreats were the first time that people outside of my family got to really understand why I was shy or why I was not as vocal or being able to talk about my emotions. I remember I became one of the retreat leaders and it helped me to grow in my faith and understand who I was as a person. I found my voice.”

I Rise above Adversity, I Am Resilient – A Perspective on Resilience

The question of whether the research participants viewed themselves as resilient was only asked of those who were interviewed either face-to-face or via Skype or who participated in a focus group meeting. Each research participant was asked whether they viewed themselves as resilient based on the following definition, which was given to them to review and reflect upon during their interview: “Resiliency is defined by the ability of a person to rise above significant adversity and have a reasonably successful life course, avoiding serious psychiatric disorder, substance abuse, criminality, or social-relational problems.”

I used this definition—a quotation from Kimberly Gordon Rouse—based on the complexity of the negative aspects of one’s life course that could affect whether someone is deemed resilient. However, in contrast, my focus is not on the negative aspects of my research participants’ lives, but rather on the positive protective factors that assisted them during their life course, helping them advance through adversity. Christian and Barbarin state, “African American children raised in impoverished communities deserve further attention. The story of resilient children becomes just as important as the story of children with behavior problems.”

Majority of the research participants came from adverse, low-income inner-city neighborhoods of Chicago, many experienced crime and violence, some experienced or witnessed emotional or physical abuse, many were first-generation college students, some had either one or two parents who struggled with substance abuse, some were raised by either a grandmother or another non-immediate family member, and some were raised in single-parent households. During interview

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with a former ASP staff member, she highlighted in spite of the tremulous home life of many of
the scholars, she credits the spiritual retreats. She shared, “I would say a lot of them had difficulties
that had been related to socioeconomic situations and those who did not have the typical issues
may have had mental illness in the family, or something like that, you know but some of them
were in abject poverty, they all had something. However, the spiritual development provided
support for them.”

Janine Jones writes about the effects of the violence that is experienced daily in urban
communities filled with socioeconomic stress. She states that African American children who are
exposed to violence within their neighborhoods may suffer damage to their emotional and
cognitive development. However, Jones acknowledges that—despite tremendous stressors
experienced within urban communities—some researchers such as Barbarin state, “some children
appear to be less affected than others.” My research participants would fall into this category of
young adults who were affected by chronic community violence and yet made it out of “Da Hood.”
Even Brian, in his interview, stated, “Coming from the hood and surviving, going and keep going
and see what I have seen and am now doing today. I am the master of my destiny. My biggest
influence came from the product of my environment coming from the hood itself. I learned just as
much from it.”

The Results – Spiritual Retreats creates Sacred Space

This study determined that the ASP alumni were impacted by the annual spiritual retreats
in which they participated across all four years of high school. The weekend spiritual retreats
offered a safe environment away from family, friends, and other outside influences. A majority of
the alumni stated that the ASP spiritual retreats were more impactful than their school-initiated
retreats. They felt a connection with their ASP peers and were more comfortable sharing their
individual experiences than at home, at school, or in their neighborhood. Many of the ASP alumni
attended predominantly White, Catholic high schools, where they experienced racism from their
peers, faculty, coaches, and staff. Some also felt that their White peers could not relate to or have
an understanding of the adverse situations of their own homes or communities. As one alumna
stated, many of her peers did not know that she could not afford a laptop, books, or even—
sometimes—bus fare to get to school. She could get by without many of her school peers knowing
her situation. However, at ASP spiritual retreats, which were predominantly attended by African
American scholars, she felt safe sharing her experiences in an atmosphere that was set by retreat
facilitators for open discussions about personal situations at home, school, and in one’s
neighborhood. Lastly, many of the alumni shared that they had experienced God during an ASP
retreat, either through small group discussions or church services, where they received salvation
and a relationship with God. These experiences were central to their spirituality as they
matriculated to college and continued their relationship with God. Only two alumni stated that
their beliefs and relationship with God changed either during their senior year of high school or
while attending college. One stated that he is agnostic, and the other converted to Islam.

The alumni received support in their spiritual development from ASP staff/retreat
facilitators, family, and mentors/sponsors. The social capital of family, peers, sponsors/mentors,
and other adults impacted the lives of the research participants. As the researcher, I found that
these individuals were the protective factors that assisted the research participants in becoming

20 Janine Jones, “Exposure to Chronic Community Violence: Resilience in African American Children,” Journal of
resilient. As a Christian educator, I view the presence of supportive individuals as a key factor in assisting urban African American adolescents to become successful teenagers who will matriculate into adulthood and become active citizens, making an impact in the world.

**Implications for Spiritual Retreats to Promote Resilience**

The results of this study may assist other college readiness scholarship programs, Christian educators, secondary and higher education institutions, and community and church leaders to have a better understanding of the lived experiences of African American adolescents from an urban context. The results of this study can be shared in higher education courses, Christian educators’ conferences, Christian schools, church youth groups, and community youth programs. Through an extensive review of the literature on spirituality and resilience and thirty-nine interviews/surveys with participants from ASP, this study adds to the body of knowledge regarding the lived experiences of the research participants, many of whom came from impoverished inner-city neighborhoods. The themes from this study support the finding that three key components assist in developing resiliency among African American adolescents from low- to middle-income communities: spirituality/retreats, support systems/social networks, and academic opportunities. The key component in developing resiliency—and the most influential in the lives of the research participants—was the spiritual development through annual spiritual retreats.

This study determined the importance of spiritual development during adolescence for the thirty-nine research participants who were interviewed face-to-face and/or filled out a Google Forms survey. Many participants felt they found their voice, accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, took advantage of resources available to them, gained leadership skills, learned how to manage their emotions through journaling, learned the importance of a relationship with God not through religion but through spirituality, and created bonds of friendships and commonality among their peers. Participants discussed how they had garnered positive experiences with ASP staff/retreat facilitators, sponsors/mentors, family, and peers. Many participants discussed the difficulties that they had faced in attending predominantly White, Catholic high school. They talked about their experience of racism and a lack of support from peers of other ethnicities. They felt that their White peers could not relate to or understand them, because these school peers were often from middle- to high-income families. A few reflected on the fact that they had to learn how to code switch to fit in with their non-Black peers. Despite these experiences, the research participants beat the odds of adversity and view themselves as resilient, because of the spiritual formation they received from annual spiritual retreats while in high school.

All my research participants had matriculated to a four-year college or university, many with partial or full scholarships. One participant, Brian Hicks, was called the half-million-dollar man because he received $500,000 in scholarships to attend a top-tier university. Eleven of the twelve participants graduated from college; two have completed graduate degrees—one a juris doctorate (JD) and the other a master’s degree in occupational therapy. All participants have obtained professional careers in ministry, law, marketing, banking, healthcare, insurance, municipality, or non-profit industries. One participant resigned from a high-paying entertainment industry job to become an entrepreneur.

As a Christian educator who has facilitated spiritual retreats for over twenty years, I have learned that it is important to create a sacred space for inner-city African American youth. This sacred space opens the door for adolescents to be heard. They can share without judgment traumatic events they may have experienced at home, in school, or in their neighborhoods. In addition, they bonded with their peers as they listened to each other share their stories, therefore,
many created lasting friendships. Allowing youth to give voice to their pain, reflect through journaling, and learn Biblical Scriptures are healing mechanisms that enable them to gain a relationship with God, walk in forgiveness, and obtain salvation, as they learn who they are in Christ. Many of the research participants stated that they learned what it meant to be a leader through being a retreat leader for underclassmen in the program. This opportunity offered them a means of inclusion and acceptance, teaching them that they had a voice and had a responsibility to show leadership skills and make a difference in their own life and the lives of their peers.

Giving youth, a voice will allow churches, schools, community organizations, and other programs to address the needs of the youth and validate them to know that they have a purpose. Through the spiritual retreats, the ASP youth were given opportunities to assist in the planning and implementation of the retreats alongside the adults. Anne Streaty Wimberly has researched the importance of intergenerational ministry between African American youth and adults. She states, “In my opinion, one of the real voids in most churches is the lack of a truly intergenerational focus within them. Contact with older adults is more likely to give young people mentors with mature faith.”21 It was always my goal through the spiritual retreats to have Jeremiah 29:11–13 as the foundational Scripture, so that retreat participants could hear from adults that their lives had a meaning and purpose, that they might have hope for the future.

This study unveiled the importance of creating safe spaces for African American adolescents to feel comfortable to share their lived experiences of being in adverse environments. These opportunities allow participants to create bonds, share their stories, gain an understanding of who they are, and practice leadership and spiritual development. Providing this type of emotional and spiritual support can assist many youth and adolescents who need a space to vent and be themselves without any judgment. The study can be replicated to other programs that are similar to Agape Scholars Program. Spirituality provides a sense of self, meaning, and hope for one’s future. Further research can examine how other African American youth and adolescents see themselves as resilient and how spirituality is a protective factor.

Bibliography


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