

## **Rites of Passage Revisited—Reimagined, Reenvisioned, Recalibrated**

### **Copyright Richelle B. White, Ph.D.--Kuyper College, Grand Rapids, Michigan**

*“I am compelled and inspired to teach and write about the distinctives of being and living as a Black girl. The beings and lives of Black girls deserve spaces and opportunities to be seen and valued as unique individuals created in the Imago Dei. Black girls, in fact all girls should experience a community that is centered around positive identity development that supports who they are and why their lives matter.”<sup>1</sup>*

### **Rites of Passage Revisited**

During the 1980s, there was a strategic move within the African American community to create Afro-centric rites of passage for Black males. Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu brought a much-needed perspective to the plight of Black males within the realm of public education. His three volume series, *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys*, was and continues to be a blueprint that offers suggestions to correct the dehumanization of Black children and outlines how Black boys can grow up to be strong, committed, and responsible men.<sup>2</sup> Because of Dr. Kunjufu’s research, Black communities across the United States have begun sponsoring rites of passage programs for Black boys.

This great emphasis on male rites of passage programs ignited a flame within me and propelled me to ask a few questions: What about Black girls? Who will take care of them? Who will teach them what it means to be Black? To be a Woman? To be a Christian disciple? The more questions I asked, the more my passion and call to do something became clear. I possessed a great desire to create a church-based rites of passage and mentoring ministry for Black girls, and so I began this journey.

At the time I was pondering these questions, I was in graduate school studying criminal justice with an emphasis on juvenile delinquency crime prevention and control. My graduate thesis would be the implementation and assessment of a church-based rites of passage program for Black girls. My research study would determine if adolescent and preadolescent females would positively benefit from a comprehensive (physical, spiritual, emotional, intellectual, social) rites of passage program that would aid

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<sup>1</sup> Richelle B. White

<sup>2</sup> Jawanza Kunjufu. *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys*. (Chicago: African American Images, 1985, 1986, 1990).

in the development of character, maturity, responsible thinking and behavior. An African centered rites program aimed at instilling a strong positive sense of self and achievement in Black youth informed this study.<sup>3</sup>

A rite is a ceremony of celebration. Passage refers to a movement from one position to another. Thus, the rite of passage for adolescents is a supervised, developmental, educational process whose goal is to assist young people in attaining knowledge as well as accepting the responsibilities, privileges, and duties of an adult member of society.<sup>4</sup> As a socialization process, rites of passage programs prepare Black males and females for adulthood, focusing on the following principles of Africentricity as presented by Useni Eugene Perkins:<sup>5</sup>

1. Community elders have a responsibility for helping to train youth to become responsible adults.
2. Youth cannot sufficiently teach themselves to become responsible adults.
3. The socialization of youth must be channeled through institutions that provide them with critical life-sustaining support systems.
4. When the above principles do not occur, we should not expect our youth to be totally responsible for the actions, which are counterproductive to the welfare of the community.

Being inspired by Warfield Coppock's and Perkins' ideas on adolescent rites of passage and positive youth development, **Sisters in the Spirit Rites of Passage and Mentoring Ministry** was created in 1994. Sisters in the Spirit (S.I.S.) was established as a church-based rites of passage ministry hosted by Payne Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore, Maryland. Participants included both church and unchurched youth, as well as different denominations.

The S.I.S. vision statement reads, "To educate and empower the African American young women between the ages of 8 and 18 to become Christian leaders in the twenty-first century." The methods to

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<sup>3</sup> Gwen Moore, et al. *Transformation: A Rites of Passage Manual for African American Girls*. (New York: Star Press, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Nsenga Warfield-Coppock. "The Rites of Passage Movement: A Resurgence of African Centered Practices for Socializing African American Youth." *The Journal of Negro Education*, 61(4), 472.

<sup>5</sup> Useni Eugene Perkins. *Harvesting New Generations: The Positive Development of Black Youth* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1986), 198.

achieve this vision are identified in the ministry's mission statement: "To provide a comprehensive (physical, emotional, intellectual, social, spiritual) Bible-based curriculum, plus one to one and group mentoring experiences for adolescent and preadolescent females to help them chart their course to holistic womanhood."<sup>6</sup> This comprehensive program included ten major areas of educational/curricular instruction: Family History, Sex Education, History of our People, Spirituality, Taking Care of Self, Housekeeping/Finance, Assertiveness/Leadership, Values Clarification/Future Planning, Time Management/Organizational Skills, Art and Dance.<sup>7</sup>

Teaching and learning sessions called study retreats were held twice each month for three hours. Study retreats include an opening and closing ritual, Bible study, large and small group teaching, a variety of learning activities and exercises, and snacks. Other program components have included Pledges, Affirmations, Ceremonies (Honoring the Elders, Opening Ceremony, Crossing Over Ceremony, and Mentor Commitment Ceremony), Super Slumber Parties, Community Quilts, Cultural Arts Excursions, Retreats, Career Expos, Kwanzaa Celebrations, Health Forums, Sports Lock-Ins, College Tours, and Outreach Events.

From 1994 to 2003, Payne Memorial was the host church for S.I.S. More than 200 young ladies participated in the ministry with many graduating from the program and returning to serve as teachers and mentors. Following its tenure at Payne Memorial, the S.I.S model was given the unique opportunity to be published by Abingdon Press in 2005 with a name change. The ministry would now be called **Daughters of Imani** (Daughters of Faith). Three resources were published with the Daughters of Imani name: *Daughters of Imani--Planning Guide*, *Daughters of Imani--Young Women's Bible Study*, and *Daughters of Imani--Celebration of Women*. This increased the exposure and influence of the ministry.

As a national curricular resource, *Daughters of Imani* is promoting positive ways for adults to assist in the positive development of Black girls. Daughters of Imani groups have been started around the United States. Some of those places are Atlanta, Georgia; Richmond, Virginia; Toledo, Ohio; Grand

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<sup>6</sup> Richelle B. White. *Sisters in the Spirit Archives 1994-2003*.

<sup>7</sup> Moore, 25.

Rapids, Michigan; Houston, Texas; and Muskegon, Michigan. Around the United States, the vision and mission of developing Christian leaders for the twenty first century continues.

Concurrently in 2005, one of the graduates of *Sisters in the Spirit*, returned to her home in Liberia, West Africa where she noticed adolescent girls were facing many issues (sexual exploitation, abuse, teenage pregnancy, lack of financial support, harmful traditional practices, under representation) due to the fourteen year civil crisis. She attributes much of her spiritual, personal and leadership growth emerged from the S.I.S experience and believed Liberian girls could benefit from a similar program, prompting her to start **Sisters with Power**.

*Sisters with Power* currently implements their work in three stages—personal development, leadership development and community building and national level advocacy. Personal development aims to empower the young women socially, emotionally, physically and spiritually. Leadership development encourages participants to identify the issues that affect the girls in their communities and guides them to think about and plan initiatives that will make positive changes in their lives and the lives of other girls. National level advocacy invites girls who show strong leadership potential to join the Girls Advocacy Forum to participate in advocacy efforts that prioritizes the empowerment of adolescent girls and young women.

Another program that has been inspired by the *Sisters in the Spirit*, *Daughters of Imani* and *Sisters with Power* rites of passage models is **In Pursuit of Identity—Building a Boldly, Believing, Beautiful YOU**. In Pursuit of Identity was created as a ministry model that engages with urban girls of color outside of the church. It was an afterschool program housed at the Gerald R. Ford Academic Center in Grand Rapids Michigan for girls in grades 3 - 6. To continue the trajectory of developing leaders for the twenty first-century, the curricular focus was identity formation, character education, leadership development, and self-esteem. Opening and closing rituals, study retreats, activities, games and snacks comprised the weekly sessions.

For almost three decades, Sisters in the Spirit and her affiliate programs have been making an impact on the young women who have been participants. Their testimonies are evidence that the

ministries have made a difference. Following are statements from participants throughout the years.

Names have been withheld. Program names and approximate years of participation are identified.<sup>8</sup>

“For the four years I have attended S.I.S, I have been able to say “no” to peer pressure and “yes” to God. S.I.S has affected my future because I could have easily fallen into peer pressure, and had a horrible future...Every girl should have the opportunity to be in a mentoring program so they can have a relationship with God and adults who care about them.”

*~Sisters in the Spirit, 1996-2000*

“I have learned a lot of things while participating in DOI. Things that go from conflict resolution to learning who I am and where I came from. But the thing that stuck out to me the most was the workshop on self-care. I learned that I need to take care of myself whether that is for my hygiene or my emotional/spiritual health. I also learned who I was and where I came from. I learned that my name is not only just my name but it is a title, a work worthy of high praise and honor.”

*~Daughters of Imani, 2009-2013*

“I am growing in my identity because I think I am very unique and I am my own person. I love myself and I know I am beautiful. I am a leader because I help people not make bad choices and lead them in the right direction. In “In Pursuit of Identity” I have learned new things and I think I will have better common sense.”

*~In Pursuit of Identity, 2015-2017*

“Sisters in the Spirit has helped me a lot during these years. Since I am an only child, I don’t spend a lot of time with other kids my age. Sisters in the Spirit has given me that chance...S.I.S will help me in the future because I will know how to present myself if I go to apply for a job or am invited to a dinner party. All of the things that I have learned about God will help me to make good choices and hard decisions in the future.”

*~Sisters in the Spirit, 1997-1999*

“This is my first year being in Daughters of Imani and have enjoyed every bit of it. It’s like I have a second home. Everyone that participates in this organization has taken what they have learned and applied it in their everyday lives. The girls that walked in on the very first day are much different now. We have grown up, matured and taken what we have learned from our mentors very seriously. My mentors are just amazing. They take time out of their busy schedules to come out and spend time with us, teach us, and fellowship with us, and I want to thank them for that.”

*~Daughters of Imani, 2014*

“In Pursuit of Identity” taught me to always be positive. Don’t talk bad about yourself and never give up. Also, I don’t care about the world’s opinion.”

*~In Pursuit of Identity, 2015-2017*

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<sup>8</sup> Richelle B. White. *Sisters in the Spirit 1994-2003, Daughters of Imani-Grand Rapids, MI 2008-2019, In Pursuit of Identity 2015-2018 Archives.*

“I wish every girl had a chance to go to S.I.S even if it was just once. S.I.S is like a second family to me...If someone needs help, we help each other. This group is good for girls who don’t have a mother and need motherly tips about life...I wish there was a commercial about S.I.S and there were different groups around the country. I really like it, and I hope it continues.”

*~Sisters in the Spirit, 1999-2002*

“Some cool things I was able to experience this season of Daughters of Imani was getting to meet a great bunch of sisters. And learning so much that I didn’t know. I think that this experience is going to make a big impact on my life because I really didn’t take the time to learn anything about African American history or anything, and now I know. So now I can use some of that knowledge and teach others about it too.”

*~Daughters of Imani, 2013-2014*

“In “In Pursuit of Identity” I learned about God more, my manners and to respect God, my family and friends. I feel that I have become a Christian of God.”

*~In Pursuit of Identity, 2015-2017*

These affirmations demonstrate that the work of rites of passage programs for girls must continue.

To increase awareness of the lives of Black teen girls, this paper will identify barriers that confront black girls and will propose ideas for reimagining, reenvisioning and recalibrating a rites of passage model that encourages, supports and provides for human flourishing. Lastly, this paper will introduce Sankofa Methods, an investigative process that will guide the research methodology for this project.

### **I Am My Sisters’ Keeper**

“Sister’s Keeper” is an expression that has been adapted from Genesis 4:9, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” when Cain asks God this rhetorical question after killing his brother Abel. “Keeper” in this context denotes responsibility for another. When surveying the state of Black girls in today’s society, I have found that Black girls are encountering life-altering struggles, disparities, and a sense of marginalization that is blocking them from being their best selves and hindering their ability to flourish. I have been charged with a responsibility to come alongside, care for, advocate for, teach, mentor and be present in the lives of young Black women. I am my sister’s keeper. When I think about what it means to fulfill such a role, I am reminded of Poet Ntozake Shange, who calls us forth to greater awareness, drawing our attention to the lives of Black girls. She says:

Somebody/anybody  
 Sing a black girl's song  
 Bring her out  
 to know herself  
 To know you  
 But sing her rhythms  
 Carin/struggle/hard times  
 Sing her song of life  
 She's been dead for so long  
 Closed in silence for so long  
 She doesn't know the sound  
 Of her own voice  
 Her infinite beauty...<sup>9</sup>

As this poem suggests, trauma and toxic stress stem from experiences that occur disproportionately in the lives of Black girls. Some of those stressors and traumas include sexual abuse and assault, poverty, criminalization, emotional distress, racialized gender violence, mental health issues, and racism.<sup>10</sup> Yet despite these great challenges, the research suggests that psychological needs of Black girls are often overlooked and misunderstood. That being said, there is a lack of sensitivity and failure on the part of adults to address these young girls' needs and to disregard their experiences.

The adversity of toxic stress derails healthy development and affects the immune and endocrine systems. It is damaging for a child's developing brain. According to a 2004 study of adults, toxic stress can bring a lifetime of negative consequences.<sup>11</sup> Toxic stress is powerful, frequent, and largely unmediated by adult support. Adverse Childhood Experiences—sexual, physical, emotional abuse or neglect, living in poverty or with household substance abuse or mental illness, having a family member incarcerated, or experiencing domestic violence—are factors that lead to toxic stress in children.<sup>12</sup> And children of color have more adverse childhood experiences than white children. The effects of the unequal

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<sup>9</sup> Ntozake Shange. "Dark Phrases," *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*. New York: Scribner, 1997), 18.

<sup>10</sup> Judith Warner. "The Unequal Toll of Toxic Stress: How the Mental Burden of Bias, Trauma and Family Hardship Impacts Girls and Women," American Progress. Accessed August 13, 2021. <https://www.americanprogress.org>

<sup>11</sup> Judith Warner, "The Toll of Unequal Toxic Stress."

<sup>12</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "About the CDC—Kaiser ACE Study," <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about.html>.

doses of adversity are compounded by the fact that Black children are less likely to receive appropriate help and support if they show the kinds of problems at home and school that are associated with adverse childhood experiences and toxic stress.

When trauma is overlooked or undiagnosed, it leads to adverse reactions and hostile responses for Black girls. Instead of receiving support, they receive punishment from teachers and school personnel, who are disproportionately white. The biased lens through which many teachers view Black girls leads them to label their signs of mental distress as bad behavior requiring harsh discipline.<sup>13</sup> These disciplinary measures can lead to suspension from school, which increases the likelihood of dropping out and having contact with the juvenile justice system.

Educationally, Black girls are being pushed aside and pushed out. For example, the *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced and Unprotected* Report<sup>14</sup> chronicles the stories of Black girls who are leaving school because of suspensions, expulsions, and a variety of other reasons. Cynthia Greenlee adds that some of those reasons include poverty, predatory boyfriends, chaotic schools, zero tolerance discipline policies, bullying, racialized gender assumptions, implicit bias and bogus offenses including talking back, sassiness and asking questions.<sup>15</sup> Monique W. Morris, cofounder of the National Women's Justice Institute and author of *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*, further confirms this reality: "Too many Black girls are being criminalized (physically and mentally harmed) by beliefs, policies and actions that degrade and marginalize both their learning and their humanity, leading to conditions that push them out of schools and render them vulnerable to even more harm."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> YWCA. "Girls of Color and Trauma." Accessed August 13, 2021. <https://www.ywca.org>.

<sup>14</sup> Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, Priscilla Owen and Jyoti Nanda. *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Unprotected* (New York: African American Policy Forum—Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies at Columbia Law School, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Cynthia Greenlee. "I'm Not Slow: Black Girls Tell Their Experiences of School." Rewire News, Accessed September 8, 2017. <https://www.rewire.news/article/not-slow-Black-girls-tell-experiences-pushout/>

<sup>16</sup> Monique W. Morris. *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*. (New York: New Press, 2016), 8-9.



Because of these circumstances, Black girls need support. Black girls are struggling and possibly blind to the possibilities that lie before them. I am my sister's keeper. I continue to become aware of the state of Black girls and how they are being affected by trauma and toxic stress. Therefore, it is necessary to revisit the Sisters in the Spirit rites of passage model and reimagine, reenvision, and recalibrate its usefulness for future generations of Black girls that they might know their infinite beauty and worth.

### **Rites of Passage Reimagined**

One of the strongest components of the Sisters in the Spirit Rites of Passage model is the mentoring relationship, which includes both one-to-one and group mentoring. Mentoring is a relationship between two or more people over a prolonged period often between a youth and an older person. The mentor provides steady support, guidance, and assistance as the younger person goes through life. The goal of the S.I.S mentoring relationships is to help the mentee gain skills and be responsible for their future.

Three essential components comprise the mentoring relationship: commitment, reciprocity, and intimacy. The mentor commits time and energy, and they share their wisdom. The mentor also holds the mentee accountable for reciprocity in the relationship. In addition, the mentor creates a sacred space that provides safety, encouragement, and responsibility. Besides commitment, reciprocity, and intimacy, S.I.S also encourages consistency, communication, candor, and caring.

As I reimagine what mentoring relationships could look like in the years to come, I visualize the role expanding to that of a mentor-coach relationship, one that models the relationship between Mary, the mother of Jesus and Elizabeth, her older cousin.<sup>17</sup> I also imagine mentoring on a virtual platform. Within the context of the COVID19 pandemic, it is important to provide hybrid and virtual means of building relationships.

Life coaching is a person-centered, strengths-based, collaborative support service to help clients achieve impactful goals. Coaching provides the support teens need to maximize their personal and

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<sup>17</sup> The Holy Bible, "The Gospel According to Luke " chapter 1.

professional potential.<sup>18</sup> Coaching motivates and encourages clients to do the work necessary to reach their goals. The image of mentor-coach comes alive in *Showing Mary: How Women Can Share Prayers, Wisdom and the Blessings of God*.<sup>19</sup> Dr. Weems draws on the story of Mary and Elizabeth in the Gospel of Luke. This story exemplifies how God uses women to support and empower one another. Dr. Weems uses the story as a framework to teach the following lessons: 1) How to discover God's true destination for our lives no matter how many wrong turns we have taken in the past. 2) How to listen to the powerful voice guiding us from within and recognizing the blessings God brings to encourage us. 3) How to find the people who will provide godly counsel and advice to help us the most. 4) How to develop the character to break out of the structures "shoulds" of girlhood—and take productive chances. 5) Learn how to help and mentor others when we ourselves are still finding the answers.<sup>20</sup> This resource illuminates the nature, importance and value of mentor-coaching relationships within S.I.S. and holds promise for virtual mentoring engagement and exploration.

A mentor-coach would take on the role of both a mentor and a life coach. The reimagined mentor's role includes the aforementioned characteristics and will prepare the youth mentee for the journey toward womanhood by sharing expertise and practical knowledge gained through their own experiences. In addition, these caring women will help young people to see the options and opportunities that are available to them, provide space for them to define themselves, and encourage them to become who they desire and dream to be.<sup>21</sup> Mentors are advocates, advisers, role models, and coaches. Meaningful relationships in adolescence set the stage for high quality and healthy relationships in adulthood.

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<sup>18</sup> Youth Coaching Institute. *Resources for New Coaches*. Accessed August 1, 2021. <https://www.youthcoachinginstitute.com>.

<sup>19</sup> Renita J. Weems. *Showing Mary: How Women Can Share Prayers, Wisdom and the Blessings of God*. (West Bloomfield: Walk Worthy Press, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Weems, inside cover.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Dortch, Jr. *The Miracles of Mentoring: How to Encourage and Lead Future Generations*. (New York: Broadway Books, 2000), 7.

Besides reimagining the role of how mentoring is embodied in the S.I.S model, I have also given thought as to how mentoring would take place. COVID-19 has changed the way relational ministry takes place in youth programming. In-person gatherings are in flux and do not provide the safest way to engage in youth ministry. I am reimagining meaningful mentor-coaching relationships in virtual environments where youth and adults can interact and learn from each other. However, virtual mentoring should not fully replace in-person mentor-coaching.

Two primary purposes of mentor-coaching include connection and support.<sup>22</sup> The lack of meaningful connections with peers, adults, school community and family members during the Coronavirus pandemic has affected youth and their physical and mental health.<sup>23</sup> Young people are experiencing a collective trauma<sup>24</sup> and are in need of social and emotional support. Therefore, support from a rites of passage mentor-coaching program could include but is not limited to the following components: personal growth and wellness, skill building, self-awareness, social awareness, academic awareness, job or career awareness, goal setting, values clarification, resilience building, stress management, and managing thoughts, emotions and behaviors.

A reimagined rites of passage mentor-coaching model using virtual and hybrid relationship building platforms provides opportunities for safe interaction and resources to support the social and emotional wellbeing of young women as they journey toward womanhood.

### **Rites of Passage Reenvisioned**

Reenvisioning begins by returning to the original vision of Sisters in the Spirit and its affiliate programs: to educate and empower African American young women to become Christian leaders in the twenty-first century. When considering what Christian leadership for young women looks like in a post

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<sup>22</sup> Ariel Ervin. "The Impact of Digital Mentoring Platforms on Multicultural Mentoring." The Chronicle of Evidence-Based Mentoring. Accessed August 1, 2021. <https://www.evidencebasedmentoring.org/the-impact-of-digital-mentoring-platforms-on-multicultural-mentoring/>

<sup>23</sup> UNICEF. "The Impact of COVID-19 on the Mental Health of Adolescents and Youth. Accessed August 1, 2021. <https://unicef.org/impact-covid-19-mental-health-adolescents-and-youth>

<sup>24</sup> America's Promise. "The State of Young People During COVID-19: Findings from a Nationally Representative Survey of High School Youth." Accessed August 1, 2021. <https://www.americaspromise.org/resources/state-young-people-during-covid-19>.

COVID 19 context, I visualize three types of emerging leadership models: youth led activism, servant leadership, and peer leadership.

The murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 sparked a wave of protests across the United States led by young people. Passion, purpose, and protest describe the activist work of youth who are motivated by Black freedom fighters who came before them. Young people are frustrated and angry, and they are motivated by the urgency of the realities of systemic racism, white supremacy, discrimination, and other pertinent issues.

The use of social media has been integral in identifying social problems, communicating, building community, organizing, and leading community projects. This digital civic engagement and the young people who engage it highlights that “online learning is not a system rooted in centuries of violence and oppression, so in this time we can work to build a new precedent,” says Charla Agnoletti.<sup>25</sup>

Reenvisioning leadership using youth led activism with Sisters in the Spirit requires practical support from leaders, teachers, and mentor-coaches. Support includes 1) Making digital tools accessible. 2) Giving encouragement. 3) Learning the variety of ways that youth use social media to engage civically. 4) Following teenage change makers. 5) Building digital curricula about social change as well as the true histories and experiences of people of color. It is also imperative that S.I.S. adult leadership teams work with youth on building a better world beyond what’s trending. This means listening and encouraging youth to speak up and speak out while providing the tools they need to become civically engaged leaders and letting them lead. As one eighteen-year old says, “Today’s protesters are tomorrow’s leaders...I know that the fight for justice, for equity, the fight for change, it did not start with us, but I’m confident that it will end with us.”<sup>26</sup> ...And a little child shall lead them.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Charla Angoletti. “Youth-Led Activism is Key to Building a Better World.” *Teach for America*. Accessed August 24, 2021. <https://www.teachforamerica.org/one-day/opinion/youth-led-activism-is-key-to-building-a-better-world>.

<sup>26</sup> Miranda Bryant. “It Was Time to Take Charge: The Black Youth Leading the George Floyd Protests.” *The Guardian*. Accessed August 24, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/15/black-youth-activism-george-floyd-protests>

<sup>27</sup> Isaiah 11:6.

Continuing the vision of educating and empowering Black girls to be Christian leaders continues with servant leadership. The African American women of the Civil Rights Movement embody what it means to model the leadership demonstrated by Jesus. During the Civil Rights Movement, Black women played significant roles at all levels. Some were leaders of organizations while others did not possess a title or official role--they simply did the work that needed to be done, not expecting anything personal in return.<sup>28</sup> I honor them by recalling their names: Ida B. Wells, Rosa Parks, Dorothy I Height, Georgia Gilmore, Coretta Scott King, Septima Clark, Diane Nash, Fannie Lou Hamer, Unita Blackwell, Myrlie Evers, Ella Baker, Judy Richardson, Leah Chase, Kathleen Cleaver, Gay McDougall, Gloria Richardson, Aileen Hernandez, Mahalia Jackson, June Jackson Christmas, and Aretha Franklin.<sup>29</sup>

Servant leaders desire to serve their communities. Their concern is not to gain power for themselves. Jesus is the Christian's model for servant leadership and Black women have used this model for generations. Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be first must take the last place and be the servant of everyone else."<sup>30</sup> There are several characteristics of servant leadership that the African American women in the Civil Rights movement embody and are essential for Black girls of today and tomorrow to consider as they become servant leaders. They are showing humility, serving as teachers and mentors, being good communicators, and leading by example.

**Humility** comes from a place of integrity and honesty. Leaders are learners. Learning requires humility and a willingness to be open to new ideas, perspectives and processes. Seeing one's weaknesses as opportunities for growth and being in the company of others who have strengths and gifts that we lack is a sign of humility. Servant leadership is not about being first, but humbling oneself to walk with and alongside others.

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<sup>28</sup> Janet Dewart Bell. *Lighting the Fires of Freedom: African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement*. (New York: New Press, 2018), 1.

<sup>29</sup> This is not an exhaustive list. Many other Black women recognized and unrecognized participated in the American Civil Rights movement.

<sup>30</sup> Mark 9:35, New Living Translation

***Teachers/Mentors*** Servant leaders teach and mentor others. They teach formally and informally in ways that are clear and understandable. Servant leaders also mentor others by inspiring them. They encourage others towards greater effort, enthusiasm, and creativity. As teachers and mentors, servant leaders help to positively influence others.

***Good Communicators*** As good communicators, servant leaders correspond in a variety of ways—speaking, writing, listening, reading. They are persuasive, concise, precise and personable. Good communicators instill confidence in others, motivating them to work as well as appreciating others for their contributions. Servant leader communicators know what to say and how to say it.

***Leads by Example*** When a leader does a small or menial task, in many instances others will join them. Todd Outcalt outlines a four-step servant leadership strategy to influence others to follow their example. He says 1) I will do the job and you watch me do it. 2) I will do the job and you help me do it. 3) You will do the job and I will help you do it. 4) You will do the job and I will do something else (Repeat the process of teaching).<sup>31</sup>

Being humble, serving others through teaching and mentoring, being a good communicator, and leading by example are a few of the characteristics of servant leadership embodied by African American women in the Civil Rights Movement. African American servant leaders are also compassionate, transformative, and adaptive. They are compassionate in that they are forgiving and redemptive, transformative because they encourage people to develop their own approaches and support them in achieving their goals, and they are adaptive in that they ensure that leaders thrive in challenging times. This rich history of servant leadership serves as a foundation for Black girls in a post-COVID 19 context to serve as leaders in their churches, schools, communities, and in the world.

In addition to youth led activism and servant leadership, peer leadership is a viable model that involves teen girls in meaningful and interactive educational experiences that focus on key issues in order to make change. Peer leadership is a model that provides information, builds skills, and engages youth in

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<sup>31</sup> Todd Outcalt. "Servant Leadership in Youth Ministry." *Ministry Matters* Accessed August 25, 2021. <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/3553/servant-leadership-in-youth-ministry>

positive group interaction. It supports youth empowerment and encourages young people to use their voices to help other young people have a voice thereby creating conduits for personal and community transformation.<sup>32</sup>

Youth Leadership Initiative shares a framework for peer leadership to elevate youth participation, development of voice, and leadership. These components are essential to the effectiveness of the model. First, elevating youth voices, which includes recognizing that youth are knowledge bearers and knowledge seekers and then taking the necessary steps to incorporate them into every facet of the organization's life and mission. Young people's voices are honored by supporting peer mentor's abilities to design and facilitate programming and mentor their peers.<sup>33</sup> Second, a team approach between youth and adults adds value to the peer leadership model. Having the same expectations for youth and adults creates an equitable youth and adult partnership experience.<sup>34</sup> Adults can encourage youth to implement program initiatives, share power, make decisions, design programs, and share in management. Adults should make room for youth to share their perspectives, ask questions, offer praise and constructive criticism, and must be open to other ways of thinking. Third, the Youth Leadership Initiative creates opportunities for personal growth and leadership development, by offering teaching and training for youth to build their skill set and supporting them in holistic ways. This includes assisting young people with social and emotional development, setting goals for life, family, relationships, college and career as well as personal goals to be a better leader and to help others.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Laurie Jo Wallace. "Training Young People to Be Peer Leaders and Educators is Powerful." *Youth Today*. Accessed August 26, 2021. <https://www.youthtoday.org/2019/08/training-young-people-to-be-peer-leaders-and-educators-is-powerful/>

<sup>33</sup> Wilder Research. "Youth Mentors-A Model for Peer Leadership." *Youth Leadership Initiative*. Accessed August 26, 2021. [https://www.wilder.org/sites/default/files/imports/WilderYouthLeadershipInitiative\\_YouthMentorshipModel\\_8-18](https://www.wilder.org/sites/default/files/imports/WilderYouthLeadershipInitiative_YouthMentorshipModel_8-18)

<sup>34</sup> Wilder Research, 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Wilder Research, 2018.

The critical foundations of building a meaningful peer leadership program starts with youth input and involvement during the planning process. Reenvisioning the peer leadership model for Sisters in the Spirit includes four phases:

1) Recruiting youth mentors. This phase should be carried out by current peer leaders, beginning with an informal process of observing qualities in their peers, followed by a formalized nomination process, then by applications and interviews.

2) Preparing peer leaders. This is done by facilitating opportunities for building relationships and trust among teens and adults. Presenting a leadership skill building curriculum seeks to prepare youth for facilitating groups, working with difficult people, and identifying areas for personal growth and development.

3) Sharing responsibilities between adults and youth. For adults, this means making room for the presence and input from young people as well as honoring their contributions. For peer leaders, it means actively participating and taking responsibility for leadership tasks and opportunities.

4) Being supportive and sharing ongoing feedback. Regularly scheduled meetings and gatherings are integral for building a successful peer leadership program. Supporting peer leaders within and outside of the confines of regularly scheduled programming demonstrates support for the teens and emphasizes the importance of relational ministry.

Youth led activism, servant leadership and peer leadership are all viable leadership opportunities for a re-envisioned Sisters in the Spirit Rites of Passage and mentoring ministry. Youth led activism in a post COVID-19 world offers opportunities for youth who are called to be social change agents to make a difference. Servant leadership gives teen leaders the outlet to be creative, resourceful and able to adapt. Peer leadership lends itself for youth to learn about themselves, grow more confident, and support their peers. The beauty of incorporating these leadership models into the S.I.S vision of leadership is that they expand young people's personal vision of what leadership looks like, how it operates, and why it is important.



## Rites of Passage Recalibrated

Recalibrating the focus of Sisters in the Spirit for a post COVID-19 context will emphasize identity and purpose. While the vision and mission of S.I.S has implicitly included these two areas, now they will be explicitly and intentionally integrated into the curriculum. Two concepts that will be instrumental in exploring identity in a positive way are identifying as unashamedly Black and unapologetically Christian.<sup>36</sup>

As I consider youth identity in general and Black youth identity in particular, I have noticed that young people are seeking a false identity. The media, including social media, are identity thieves, influencing and telling youth that they cannot be themselves and they have to “fix” who they are and what they look like. These identity thieves are hijacking Black youth socio-economically, educationally, personally, emotionally, culturally and spiritually. Identity thieves are enticing Black youth to forsake their individuality as children of God. It is drawing youth away from their spiritual identity as unashamedly Black, unapologetic Christians.

Being Black is a unique, racial, historical and cultural experience because of an African past, and an American present and future. To develop a positive African identity, Black youth must be taught to view Africa, African history and culture, and African people from a place of creative strength. In addition to Black youth interpreting their identity as Africans is the necessity of viewing themselves as Americans as well. If Black youth were to only ground their identity in America, it would force them to connect with the “slave identity,” a false identity. When Africa is excluded from the beginnings of Black people, the term African American consciously and unconsciously becomes a synonym of the powerless, hopeless, helpless and degraded Black person in America.<sup>37</sup>

Moving from this perspective requires Black Americans of all ages to liberate themselves from the slave identity and examine the great repository of accomplishments of African Americans before and

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<sup>36</sup> Trinity United Church of Christ, “History of Trinity United Church of Christ.” Accessed August 29, 2021. <https://www.trinitychicago.org/the-history-of-trinity>.

<sup>37</sup> Lee H. Butler, Jr. *Liberating our Dignity, Saving our Souls*. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), 11

after emancipation. This provides inspiration, creativity, a determined work ethic, and it acts as a source of strength. Knowing who we are empowers Black youth to transcend the crucible of the slave mentality and move toward an unashamedly Black identity,

In addition to knowing who we are, it is integral for a person to know whose they are. Fostering an unapologetically Christian identity means helping youth to place their identity in Christ. Five ideas that promote a healthy perspective on Christian identity for youth include:

- 1) God creates them in His image (Genesis 1:26-27).
- 2) God's love is eternal and they cannot be separated from it (Psalm 136:1, Romans 8:38-39).
- 3) God genuinely cares about every detail of their lives (1 Peter 5:7).
- 4) Identity in Christ is solely based on Christ and his love for them (Jeremiah 31:3, Isaiah 46:6).
- 5) God created them with a purpose (Ephesians 2:10, Psalm 139: 1, 7, 13-14, 16).

Exploring identity in meaningful ways might include lessons on self-awareness, self-esteem, self-acceptance, self-care and self-love. Self-awareness is recognizing who you are, how you influence others and how others influence you. It includes taking responsibility for your thoughts, words and actions. Self-esteem is an assessment of how you view yourself as well as your worth and value in light of your assessment. Self-acceptance is the feeling of self-worth and satisfaction with yourself despite your flaws and choices, and determination to value yourself no matter what. Self-care consists of a variety of tasks that require you to take care of your overall wellness. The act of accepting, caring for and encouraging yourself and appreciating yourself is what self-love is all about. These areas of identity exploration build a foundation for healthy identity formation.

A person's identity is connected to their purpose. The two fundamental questions of adolescence—Who am I? Why am I here? help encourage youth to understand who they are and their purpose in life. Helping youth to discover their “why” by creating opportunities for finding a sense of purpose will be a recalibrated emphasis of Sisters in the Spirit. Purpose is a clear long-term direction that

a person strives toward; it guides a person's daily activities and shapes a person's sense of self.<sup>38</sup> Helping youth to engage in work and activities that are meaningful and important is essential to answering the question, "What am I meant to do with my life?"

Some people have a clear idea of their "why", but for others the "why" is not so clear. Whether it is clear or elusive, purpose is rooted in a desire to make a difference or contribute to the world in some way.<sup>39</sup> To help the participants of Sisters in the Spirit jumpstart their journey toward purpose, we will provide opportunities for them to engage and explore the following topics: spiritual gifts, passions, values, life gifts, and intentions. Spiritual gifts are abilities given by the Holy Spirit to carry out the work that God wants them to do. Bible passages on spiritual gifts include Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:1-6, Ephesians 4:1-12. Passions denote a path or skill that supports an individual in achieving her purpose. Passion intersects with our calling, our calling being what we are born to do. Values are ideals or principles that reveal what matters to you. They define our bottom-line character and guide our decisions. Life gifts are also known as talents. They are areas of interest that help us to discover the things that we do best. Finally, intentions are guiding principles that indicate how we want to be, live, and show up in the world. An intention is what we plan to do or bring about.

Exploring and studying these five dimensions of purpose can radically impact how to live unapologetically for Christ. Through careful and intentional investigation, young people begin to think about the big picture, the options available to them, their hopes and dreams of using their time, talent and treasure to positively impact and influence their peers, neighbors, communities and the world.

### **Sankofa Methods**

This research study will use *Sankofa Methods* to reflect critically on past programs, curricular practices and relationships within Sisters in the Spirit. Sankofa is a spiritual philosophy created by the Akan people of Ghana, West Africa. It is a symbol of the wisdom of learning from the past to build the

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<sup>38</sup> Jennifer King Lindley. "Discover Your Why." Health.com—December 2020. Accessed August 29, 2021. <https://www.health.com>.

<sup>39</sup> Jennifer King Lindley. "Discover Your Why."

future. It signifies a quest for knowledge based on critical reasoning as well as intentional and patient investigation of the past.

Sankofa Methods provide the opportunity for past and present participants (youth, mentors, teachers) to critically reflect on the past implementation of S.I.S. and her affiliate programs (S.I.S-Baltimore 1994-2003), (Sisters with Power-Liberia, West Africa 2005-Present) (Daughters of Imani-Grand Rapids 2008-2019), (In Pursuit of Identity 2015-2018). Reflection will encompass three areas:

- Curriculum/teaching
- Experiential Learning
- Relationships

The study is qualitative and will be used to understand how program participants have experienced the Sisters in the Spirit Rites of Passage model. Data will be collected to understand the teaching, experiences, and relationships to gather in-depth insights and generate new ideas for continued research and exploration.

Qualitative research methods will be used to collect and analyze data. Those approaches include surveys/feedback forms, ethnographies, story sharing, case studies, interviews, focus groups and examination of archival materials. Surveys or feedback forms with open ended questions will be distributed to participants. Researchers will critically engage with participants to understand the educational, relational, and formational foundations of Sisters in the Spirit through ethnography. Examining the stories to understand how participants perceive and make sense of their experiences forms a narrative approach to this research project. Creating case studies which detail the people and work of Sisters in the Spirit for the past twenty eight years will aid in describing and understanding the research question this study highlights: What can a reimagined, reenvisioned, recalibrated rites of passage and mentoring ministry look like for a new generation? Requesting one-on-one interviews to ask key questions to discover personal perspectives of the Sisters in the Spirit experience will contribute to the overall vision of this study. Focus groups or asking questions and generating discussion is included as well. Finally, the examination of archival materials helps to further understand the overarching themes of

S.I.S. From the data collected from past participants, the research team will reimagine, reenvision, and recalibrate the S.I.S. model of faith based teaching and mentoring.

This collective repository of wisdom collected through *Sankofa Methods* based on past practices, participant involvement, and relationships allows space to ask and answer important questions and move forward with a solid understanding of what might (or might not) be reclaimed, revived, preserved, and nurtured for the future of youth ministry in the Black church. I hope to share my research findings through conferences, training, conference presentations, workshops, consultations, podcasts, video/documentary. Written and digital forms of dissemination include articles, books, curriculum resources, conference materials, and leadership training materials, which explore intergenerational and village connectedness.

### Summary

The Lord said to Habakkuk, *“Write down the revelation and make it plain on the tablets so that a herald may run with it. For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks to the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it, it will certainly come and will not delay.”*<sup>40</sup> A gospel songwriter sings-- *“Write the vision, make it plain, that they may run and not faint. Though the vision is only for a while. It shall speak and not lie. For if the Lord said it, you can count on it. He will do just what he said. It is so, yes it is so, God will do just what he said.”*<sup>41</sup>

I heard a spirit and soul filled rendition of this song in 1998, in the city of Monrovia, Liberia, West Africa. I was there as part of a delegation to witness the first graduation of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) University in the midst of civil unrest. The passage from Habakkuk was familiar, but the song--*The Vision*--was not. As I sat among the worshippers that evening, I remembered Sisters in the Spirit, and I knew that God destined it to be an apostolic ministry that would reach many young women in many parts of the world. The S.I.S. programs--Sisters with Power, Daughters of Imani and In Pursuit of Identity--are a testament to that promise.

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<sup>40</sup> Habakkuk 2:2-3, NIV

<sup>41</sup> Patrick Love, “The Vision,”

Now again, I find myself writing and expanding on the vision and making it plain, so that others (past participants) may join the movement of teaching and mentoring girls of all races and cultures to become all that God is intending for them to become. This is a Sankofa moment of critically reflecting on the past, learning from it and building the future. I am eager to revisit Rites of Passage after almost thirty years in order to reimagine, reenvision, and recalibrate ministry to girls whose lives matter. God is more than faithful. He is a promise keeper. God gives our lives meaning and purpose. I am a living testimony of his grace and goodness. I am honored and thankful that God chose me to carry this vision and avail myself to its manifestation.