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For my LARC research with Professor Gutterman in the summer of 2012, I propose to study the changing political identity and impact of the Black Church in the post Civil-Rights Movement era as well as how these changes will continue to manifest themselves in the future. In doing this, I hope to examine two examples of the changing theological identity of the Black Church. While there have been many changes in the tides of Black theological schools of thought in the post-Civil Rights Movement era, my research will mainly focus on two prominent theologies within the Black Church: Black liberation theology, also known as Black theology, and the prosperity gospel. These differing theological perspectives have each waxed and waned during the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first; my research will address how their disparate doctrines have worked both together and in competition to create new definitions of African American identity and political engagement in the U.S.

My research will consist of comparisons of these theologies in three general categories: theological underpinnings, the face of black leadership, and their actual and perceived political actions and identities in the post-Civil Rights Movement era. In using these categories, I hope to understand the ways in which these theological schools differ in their interactions with the US social and political climates. These three categories, while being used to understand the framework of my analysis, should not be understood as separate, but intertwined. For example, in my search to understand the ways in which the theological foundations and understandings within the Black Church have affected its political actions, I will analyze many texts taken from those considered the major leaders in both theological schools, such as James Cone and Otis Moss III within Black theology and Prophet Jones and Eddie Long within the prosperity gospel, among others.

The stakes of the differences between these two strands in the Black Church are clearly apparent with regard to socio-economics. Whereas Black liberation theology has its roots in the linking of a Marxist critique of capitalism and Christian social teaching, the prosperity gospel endorses an embrace of American capitalism. One recent example of these connections between religious doctrine and politics have also been seen in followers of the prosperity gospel in the Black Church, which, according to Wall Street Journal writer Soares DeForest, Jr, is “… a movement and a theology that once seemed like an aberration among black churches [but] now appears to be mainstream” (2010). Critics of the prosperity gospel have connected it not only to the culture of wealth accumulation and capitalism in the United States, but even cite it as one of the causes of the recent recession and housing bubble. In this way, a new political identity is being shaped for the Black Church in the post-Civil Rights Movement era and is being directly connected to modern political events.

These very different connections between the Black Church’s changing identity and its political impact raise many questions. For example, how has the politics, theology, and status of the Black Church in America changed, and are these changes proportional and/or similar to the changes in the perceived political and personal identities within the eyes of church members? How are these competing factions shaping the once prominent view of the Black Church as a unitary force for
social change as well as shaping African American identity as a whole? I hope to explore these and other questions further as I undertake my research this summer.