Oral Defense Announcement
University of Missouri – St. Louis Graduate School

An oral examination in defense of the dissertation for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy in Education with an emphasis in Educational Leadership & Policy Studies

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Religious Leadership: Agents of Social Change

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Place: Remote

Abstract
Historically, churches in the United States acquired respect as institutions that cultivated spiritual maturity and advocated for social equality in Black communities. Religious leaders represent the voice of reason for communities facing complex social problems, then and today. How educational attainment influences religious leaders’ social action strategies and decisions to engage or disengage in social activism is under explored. Additionally, it is unclear what strategies religious leaders use for social advocacy in their communities. Using andragogy and social cognitive theory as theoretical frameworks, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the educational experiences of religious leaders to understand their social advocacy strategies in Black communities and what meaning they make of their experiences. Specifically, religious leaders’ social advocacy strategies within Black communities in Ferguson, MO, and surrounding communities were investigated. How did religious leaders develop their social advocacy strategies prior to the unrest in Ferguson? Using a thematic data analysis, four themes were identified: Leadership Development, Community Engagement, Racial Experiences, and Progressing Forward. Attributes of informal and formal education structured their plans of action. The findings from this study revealed the religious leaders’ development involved training, education, and external influences. Additionally, their social advocacy decisions included congregational support and community partnerships. These findings may influence individual and collective social advocacy locally, nationally, and globally. Furthermore, understanding religious leaders’ strategies can facilitate future conversations concerning social advocacy in Black communities. Thus, positioning religious leaders as agents for social change in the twenty-first century and beyond.

Defense of Dissertation Committee
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