

# The Black Church and Liberal Arts Institutions: Forming Reciprocal Relationships for Thriving Urban Communities and Churches

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## Abstract

Academic institutions engaged in partnerships with the Black Church, including small, independent, under-resourced churches as well as historically Black denominational churches, and other under-resourced faith-based organizations, are encouraged to consider collaborative educational opportunities around the issues of strategic financial sustainability and short and long-term stewardship. Four highly community-engaged academics offer a thought-experiment starting with their observations and experiences with respect to the need for such partnerships, and how these kinds of collaborations may be able to help strengthen the Black Church, in all its forms and faith-based communities and ground them for greater advocacy for demanding systemic and structural change.

**Keywords:** Black Church, community engagement, faith-based organizations, churches, sustainability, stewardship

The authors of this paper are engaged academics and community advocates who also have been highly active in small urban, predominantly minority-serving non-denominational and denominational churches and other faith-based community organizations for decades. As we have traversed the often-distinct spaces of small churches, faith-based organizations, academic, other non-profit environments, and underserved communities, we are keenly aware of the strengths, similarities, and opportunities for reciprocal learning in all of these environments. Together we bring more than 100 years of experience within churches and faith-based organizations, over 125 years of higher education and/or other non-profit career experience, and more than 50 years of post-secondary education. Based on these experiences, we offer the following thought-experiment. We find ourselves imagining the transformative potential of applying key liberal arts principles with which we have become accustomed in our academic lives to help address challenges we have observed for years in our various faith-based community engagements.

We have reached a point of great concern with respect to the future and sustainability of small, independent churches and faith-based organizations in underserved communities in the United States. This paper stems from the disconnects we experience as we maneuver between church, academy, and community. Although these environments are often physically close, there is a chasm between their approaches to future planning and problem solving. Our collective concerns have been exacerbated and made more urgent by the impact of the novel coronavirus pandemic.

For academic institutions who partner with small, independent non-denominational and denominational churches, or faith-based community organizations, this article poses a question for consideration. What would happen if small, independent churches, as well as denominational and other faith-based organizations more purposefully applied sustainability principles such as those common to liberal arts colleges? For example, Owens (2008) offered that churches should “preach what we should practice,” and that we must cross the gaps of science, religion, and culture in order to become literate in environmental, health, policy, and educational matters in order to lead God’s people. As responsible citizens, we must be fluent in speaking about issues that impact our communities on the local, national, and global levels, much like a sound liberal arts education.

Our aim is not to theoretically position liberal arts institutions as saviors to grassroots faith-based organizations, but rather, to leverage the unique resources within the academy and to create opportunities for mutual benefit. We have found that small, independent churches often operate in reactive-survival mode, with leaders necessarily focused on putting out proverbial fires. These organizations rarely have the time or inclination to consider leadership models to ensure their long-term success. Liberal arts institutions often employ strategies for sustainability that may be

of interest to small churches, including collaboration and interdisciplinarity, shared governance, strategic financial planning, equity, and diversity.

This paper is our thought-experiment to encourage others to consider liberal arts principles and their potential benefit to churches and faith-based community organizations. However, we first recognize the importance of faith-based organizations, and what academia can learn from them. Then we will describe challenges in small, independent churches that we have observed. Finally, we offer liberal-arts based theoretical components that could be proposed, employed, and tested within academic-community faith-based engagements.

### **What the Academy can Learn from Faith-based Organizations with Respect to Valuing Community Engagement**

The role of faith-based organizations within underserved communities has been extremely important over the centuries and decades. The Black Church is a historical community anchor in both rural and urban communities and have been significant sources of family and community support. Although there is no established or universally accepted definition, Frazier (1974) described a merger of the “invisible institution” or “brush arbor” church and the established Black Churches of the north and south, which resulted in Black denominational churches with roots in the enslavement period wherein African people were involuntarily forced into migration and were brutalized and exploited. As a result, African people were made to worship in the Christian faith, especially as it pertained to submission and obedience of Whites in power. However, many Black congregants adopted its customs, practices, and policies to also provide much needed supports that were missing within the context of what the plantation provided. Many of these churches combined the African nations’ communalism with Christian and other religious rituals from Africa. The Black Church in these contexts were secret societies that coalesced to help ensure that all members of the enslaved community would be looked after as much as possible through the sharing of information, secret intelligence, extended family kinship (blood and non-blood) networks, shared food, and other resources. Regardless of the definition or version of the Black Church and their particularities and divergences, Barrett (2010) offers that “*all* Black Churches are likely to value educational success on the part of their young congregants and that many may work (or would be interested in working) to promote their success in similar ways” (p. 250).

It also is well understood that many Black Churches, along with young middle, high school, and college students collectively, were the backbone of the 1950s and 1960s civil rights movements, and even many movements prior to those and since (Lewis & Webb, 2010). The roles of the Black Church in families and communities historically have included: spiritual development; protection and advocacy for vulnerable families and communities; provision of family and

community; and provision of economic resources and social networking when needed. It also has served an important leadership role to families and communities, offering child-rearing support and extended family kinship support. Oftentimes the church has assisted in family and community conflict resolution; elderly assistance; and mentoring of black males and females and youth (Francis, 2015), although there still tends to be a great distance needed to go with respect to mentoring of LGBTQIA+ youth. Church-related activities have helped youth develop oration, and other educational and leadership skills (Toldson & Anderson 2010). These also are the places where many talented musicians, singers, and actors, even Grammy and Academy Award winners, honed their skills. The Black Church has been a base of social service provision for the poor, sick, and disabled. It has provided education and leadership concerning economics, material, and physical survival for minorities in a predominantly white world, serving as the nucleus of community and extended community advocacy and protest. The list could continue ad infinitum.

For underserved communities, the church is often where volunteerism happens, where those historically needing to be served the most do the most serving. This dynamic is often invisible to the mainstream which does not recognize this kind of non-documented or informal service. In these contexts, service is woven into the fabric of everyday being. Thus, hundreds of years later, black and urban churches still serve these same roles, often serving as a safety net for families getting lost in the broken economy, the systems of oppression, the war on drugs, the preschool to prison pipeline, and drug epidemics that are seen as criminal by the mainstream population, as opposed to a public health crisis when it hits opioid-addicted white populations. The small independent Black, urban, as well as rural churches often have served as community focal points, not only for support, but also for resistance against oppressive policies and practices. To this day, Black Churches position spiritual development as primary, but also prioritize protection and advocacy for the Black community. Many still offer a sense of community with church leaders being of utmost importance to families. When faith-based entities do not survive or do not reach their fullest potential, the impact of that failure ripples to families and communities, even to those who are not directly associated, that is, there are adverse effects for the entire community, municipality, and beyond.

#### Acknowledgment of a Tenuous History May Lead to Reciprocal Relationships

There are many needs that the Black Church will continue to lead in addressing. Similarly, there is much that liberal arts institutions may offer the Black Church. However, both will need to acknowledge the role of historical oppressions and biases in the continued existence of a gap between the Black Church and the academy. The origins of that gap relate to a mainly Black/White racial divide that originated with the founding of the United States but was exacerbated by anti-Black racism manifested through the institution of slavery (Drewry &

Doermann, 2001) that continue through and Post- Civil War, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights movements of subsequent generations.

The first Black Americans on record as earning baccalaureate degrees were Edward Jones and John Russworm, who graduated in 1826 from Amherst and Bowdoin Colleges, respectively. By the time of the end of the Civil War in 1865, the Black American population had reached 4.4 million, but only 26 more Black people are reported to have earned baccalaureate degrees (Drewry & Doermann, 2001). Prior to the Civil War, some schools for free Black Americans were founded and became the first Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). What are now Cheyney State, Lincoln, and Wilberforce Universities granted their baccalaureate degrees in the 1930s. Education continued and remains as an elusive endeavor for the descendants of enslaved Africans. Formal and higher education were institutions that were withheld, and presently, access to quality education remains a challenge.

Thus, the educational divide created a class divide among African Americans, as access to education was and is tied to racism, oppression, economic opportunity, and basic human dignity. There are historic, complex, and sometimes antithetical relationships between faith, education, and the Black community (Mitchell, 2010). Education, although seen as a way out, was also seen as a dividing point because it was not accessible to all. There were always free Black people, but social class is an important variable in navigating those relationships. Teachers and preachers were often among the more educated people in Black communities, the former profession being mostly women and the latter being mostly men. Accordingly, among the denominational and nondenominational Black Churches, social class and gender remain in terms of church leadership, worship style, music, and prescribed gender roles (Warnock, 2014).

Relationships with teachers, not professors, emerged as access to education increased. However, the presence of university professors has not increased to the point where they are commonplace in most Black Churches. Garnering trust in an educational system that has a history of racially exclusionary structural inequalities, built on foundational tenets of Black inferiority (Barrett, 2010) presents a grand challenge for collaborative progress.

There is a pride in and of the Black professional class, but there is also a suspicion of “educated people who acted as though they were ‘above’ less well-educated members of the community” (Siddle Walker, p. 85). Success in collaboration with the Black Church means reading the room, code switching, and being the person who can talk to less formally educated church leaders on their level while also being someone that they can look up to and trust. Black professors must behave in ways where our education is not threatening.

## Learning from the Black Community

There is much that academic institutions can learn from engagement with small faith-based organizations and from academic peers who carry strong faith. First, many professors, staff, and students may not understand that for many people, faith is not secularized into specific spaces and timeslots, for example, Sunday morning. Many faith-based community partners and some academic partners carry faith with them 24-7, even into their classes, campus programs, and generally in how we respond to various situations. Those who operate with faith-based principles in academic settings often draw from their spirituality in their relationships and communications with students and colleagues, helping to foster a culture of inclusion and respect.

Secondly, academic institutions can learn that because academics may allow our faith to be seen, it does not mean that we do not respect or even appreciate the faiths of others. We may have a deep respect for other religions while clinging tightly to our own, which can put us at times at odds with our own faith-based organizations who may believe that there is only one way to love or serve God. Likewise, our faith-beliefs and practices can put us in awkward positions with our institutions, at times, feeling stuck between worlds as believers and academics.

Thirdly, there is a great deal that engagement with faith-based organizations can teach academics about the role of faith in everyday life, including the efficacy of the children, adults, and elders engaged within their faith-based organizations, and the social activism, networking, fund-raising, and creative problem solving that can occur within small, independent faith-based arenas. Thus, while we are focused on presenting liberal arts values and strategies as potentially helpful for small, independent faith-based organizations, we do not mean to suggest that partnerships and learning between academia and faith-based organizations are not mutually beneficial. We offer a potentially helpful theoretical framework for problem-solving, but do not intend to position academia as a paternalistic savior of vulnerable churches.

### Challenges Observed within Small Independent Churches

The Pew Research Center (2018) reports a rapid decline of Christianity in the United States, with the largest decreases occurring in the Catholic Church as well as mainline Protestant denominations, yet 79% of African Americans self-identify as Christian. Nearly half of Black Christians are not associated with historically Black Protestant denominations. By measures of religious commitment, importance of religion, daily prayer, and weekly church attendance, African Americans are more religious than White and Latinx populations. However, the percentage of African Americans who are religiously unaffiliated has increased with differences in age. 18% of African Americans adults overall remain unaffiliated, but that increases to nearly 30% when the focus is young adults between the ages of 18 and 29. Comparatively speaking,

only 7% of Black adults over the age of 65 self-report as religiously unaffiliated. Thus, like other populations, membership in the Black Church overall is decreasing.

In spite of these trends, the Black Church, in all of its forms, continues to stand in the gap for children and families who may be struggling, although the churches simultaneously are also struggling. Under-resourced communities are very rich in creativity and resourcefulness, yet financially limited and vulnerable to sustainability challenges. Therefore, attention to community assessment, mission, financial planning, and sustainability are extremely important. Yet, these may be the areas with the least undergirding. Thus, the churches with the most to offer might have the fewest resources for assuring their sustainability. Every time a church that provides communal support to children and families closes, an entire community of people, sometimes numbering in the thousands if counting their collateral impact, are left to fend for themselves, or to seek another church that may not be a reasonable distance from home. Trust within a church community takes time, sometimes years to build among its members, so starting over in a new church can be very problematic, from the transportation to get there to the trust that also takes time to establish in any relationship. The fact that so many churches are closing, and at a rate higher than they are growing, presents a startling gap for minority children and families who rely on these churches to help them move from isolation toward community, and from disenfranchisement toward empowerment.

Historically, the Black Church has maintained its role as a hub for social services provided to predominately African American communities. As time has progressed, African Americans have obtained greater access to resources and education, which has been both a reward and a challenge for some Black Churches. In other words, some segments of the community have not had to rely on the church as much for assistance with basic, emotional, networking, and meditative needs, while the least resourced still do. Many churches are capitalizing on the diverse set of skills and knowledge offered by the current generation of African American and ally members that are highly educated, skilled, networked, and resourced. The churches that have found the most success in this era have been able to translate congregants' skills and education directly into church involvement and leadership.

Simultaneously, many Black Churches have relied on faith with little to no practical implementation. While Black communities are suffering from high levels of poverty, lack of education, inadequate housing, increased violence, health disparities and other social issues, what is the church's responsibility beyond having faith? Resistance against systemic barriers must accompany our faith. Relying on faith without also strategically planning and fighting for structural change may have contributed to a large number of churches becoming stagnant in their growth, even to the point of extinction. To this, the church must not only proactively engage short and long-term sustainable strategies, but also nurture their membership with tools to meet the demands for change. Thus, we have observed increasingly greater tensions within Black and

minority churches involving appreciation for diversity, expectations of transparency and accountability, and demands for shared governance and strategic sustainability.

We have noticed the tendency for the faith-based organizations not already embedded within a long-standing and/or well-functioning, minimally secure financial, and structural system to be especially at risk because they have no larger or protective organizational structure to fall back on when the going gets rough. Nonetheless, it is this independence that makes the non-denominational arm of the Black Church so important, because of their freedom from rigid religious structures and doctrines. The freedom where a church answers only to God may be attractive to participants who wish to avoid the politics of larger, more highly structured churches. It often is these small, independent churches that have great appeal to the younger generations, because they may not be as steeped in traditionalism, but that very thing also may be what also makes these churches most vulnerable. In other words, these independent churches may be less likely to have actively engaged governing boards that can proactively and critically look out for the interests of the church as a collective. Our years of experience in liberal arts environments have helped us understand some of the challenges faced by non-profit institutions of all kinds, including small, under-resourced churches. In the next section of this paper, we outline some of these challenges and offer strategies for consideration.

**Challenge 1: A greater need for clarity of mission, shared governance, ongoing assessment, and consistent accountability**

The Black Church includes organized denominations and conventions such as the African Methodist Episcopal (AME), African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ), Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME), Church of God in Christ (COGIC), Church of God by Faith (COGBF), and several Baptist Conventions (e.g., National Baptist, Progressive Baptist, National Missionary Baptist, etc.) that have more centralized organizational hierarchies. It has been our experience that many small, urban, and rural independent faith-based organizations could benefit from assessment and accountability in mission, structure, and goals. A strong, participant-engaged mission statement serves as a declarative statement describing who a group is, what optimal goals are desired, and also gives insight on how those goals will be accomplished. Too often the goals tied to a church's mission statement only allude to the work that the church strives to do, but never ties it to an overall mission to be achieved. These organizations should embark on the project of reevaluating their mission statement and goals to be sure that they effectively are meeting the needs of their membership and those within the community. Assessment is an ongoing process to examine patterns, use and efficiency of resources, effectiveness, and cumulative impact. It has been our experience that without transparent assessment, resulting accountability is difficult or non-existent. Because independent faith-based organizations are not governed by any secular higher offices, it can be difficult to structure transparency and accountability. Some states require that nonprofits have a governing board, however, we have

observed that those boards often are in name only. Consequently, leadership may not be truly challenged to consider diverse viewpoints, or to try diverse strategies for developing and implementing policies and procedures. Decisions, therefore, may be made arbitrarily, authoritatively, emotionally, inequitably, self-servingly, or unsustainably. The solution is not necessarily for a church to join a hierarchically organized denomination, but rather non-denominational churches may develop well-functioning shared-governance structures, creating internal systems of accountability and oversight. Shared-governance may bring together leaders, congregants, and community participants who are faith and practical-minded to form a decision-making collaborative who will look out for the best interests of the independent church. If there is no transparency and no accountability, then the faith-based organization could be argued as being cultish by any number of definitions (Richardson, 1993). Academic institutions may be able to assist or at least model transparency for their faith-based community partners who may need more of it.

### Challenge 2: Short and long-term sustainability plans and goals

The hope of sustainability begins with attention not only to the short-term survival of an organization, but also mission-driven strategic planning, including financial planning, toward long-term goals. A lack of financial acumen directly impacts sustainability when faith-based organizations are not educated on savings, development, investments, wealth management, and managing endowments. For example, small, faith-based organizations may be renting from expensive hotels in order to hold services rather than collaborating with community resources for free or nominal expense spaces enabling saving for a down payment to purchase a long-term space. Academic institutions engaged with small, independent churches might serve them well by offering spaces for holding services, youth programs, and other events while also assisting them with their financial sustainability plan if needed.

### Challenge 3: Greater need for appreciation of diverse viewpoints and interdisciplinarity

We have found that like many faith-based organizations in our nation, the Black Church, as well as small, urban, and rural independent churches could benefit from diverse points of view and interdisciplinarity, beginning with an active board, and including the rest of its membership. Ideally, a governing board should include diverse membership, perhaps including at least one member from outside of the church structure, someone who can bring additional expertise to the governing board, such as a financial expert, attorney or other legal expert, a grant-writer, or a consultant, if such expertise is not already found among the members. Interdisciplinarity can also be nurtured by the sharing of ideas across occupations, topics, arts, sciences, programs, trainings, environments, and cultures so that learning and creativity do not come exclusively from church-related activities. In any case, academic institutions who work with small, faith-based

organizations may be able to assist them in understanding how appreciation for diversity and interdisciplinarity might help to strengthen the effectiveness of the governing board.

#### Challenge 4: Greater need for critical thinking and academic humility

Related to some of the previous challenges, in our decades of experience with small, the Black Church as well as small urban and rural churches, we have found a tendency at times for critical thinking to be frowned upon among membership and governing boards. At first blush, it may seem to be a direct challenge to critical thinking. Remembering that the historically the Black Church fosters education of its members as a mechanism for uplift, what may be misconstrued as anti-intellectualism may be a defensive posture to the revelation of deficiencies in knowledge, training, and skills. Academic institutions engaged with small, faith-based organizations may be able to gently educate and model, with humility, appreciation for critical thinking where needed.

#### Liberal Arts Leadership Principles

As faith-based-grounded scholars, it is common or natural for us to bring ideas from the academic world to our faith-based endeavors (e.g., the expectation of accountability), and vice versa, to bring our faith-based experiences to our academic life (e.g., “call and response” methods in our teaching). The more that we have found ourselves crossing among the academic, faith-based, and community worlds, we have found ourselves bringing our knowledge from all of those worlds everywhere we go, and it has changed us and our expectations in all of those spaces. We have learned to expect greater transparency, accountability, diversity, interdisciplinary, and sustainability in everything in which we expend our energies and resources. However, we also recognize the historical variables that may fuel the tensions between the Black Church and the academy.

There are many rewards in town-gown faith-based partnerships, including the potential of such partnerships to help make demands on systemic structures for equity and social justice while also helping to support community needs, something that the Black Church models for liberal arts institutions. Another reward, often less talked about, is the transformative power of such partnerships on higher education institutions such as the social learning and greater awareness of diversity issues that such partnerships bring to students, professors, and administrators. In honoring that power, liberal arts institutions may be able to partner with the Black Church in evaluating and revising mission and governance documents as well as sustainability planning and continuous leadership development.

## Shared Governance

In the liberal arts environments that we have traversed, we have discovered a tendency and value for shared governance and wide-spread input. Shared governance involves a full participation process where all stakeholders have an opportunity to have their voices represented on policy decision-making either via representatives, survey, open meetings, democratic vote, and/or some other form of input and engagement on issues and decisions. It does not mean that a hierarchical structure does not exist, but that those hierarchies are entrusted to seek the input of those for whom they represent or are responsible. Shared governance seeks as much diverse and equitable input as possible, in order to ensure that all components of an organization, or even a household, has been heard and considered. Shared governance creates stakeholders who feel their input was heard and considered, even if not agreed upon.

Related to shared governance, research has proven that diversity and interdisciplinarity in the body of shared input gives greater problem-solving potential to an organization. Diversity and interdisciplinarity in backgrounds engender creativity across boundaries. A variety of perspectives enhances not only an organization's creativity, but also its problem-solving abilities. Appreciation of diversity is not just in terms of demographic percentages and numbers, but also the ability of an organization to consider, and if necessary, act on the diverse views, opinions, issues, and perspectives, and retain its diversity of members. In our thought-experiment, we propose that diverse shared governance principles may be applicable not only to traditional businesses, but also to faith-based organizations, and even to families.

We believe that higher educational institutions that are partnered with faith-based organizations, and especially churches are strategically positioned to assist urban churches by helping them to consider the power of shared governance, leveraged by various intersectional diversities. Together, these partnerships can maximize placement in leadership roles as well as creative succession planning to ensure the sustainability of these churches. This will require a greater respect for and appreciation for diversity and interdisciplinarity which might be a challenge for some churches. However, this might be an area where academia can help their faith-based partners understand the potential relationships among shared governance, diversity, interdisciplinarity and the creativity that it engenders, and sustainability, if they do not understand them well already.

## Environmental Stewardship and Sustainability

Many Americans feel that small personal sacrifices are meaningless in terms of global environmental stewardship. As educators who hold positions of authority and respect in the Black community, pastors in the Black Church including small, urban non-denominational churches should equip ourselves to “practice what we should preach and preach what we should

practice” (Owens, 2008). In a viable partnership, liberal arts institutions may partner with pastors and church leaders to equip them with knowledge on environmental, health, and social issues in order to practice it and inform their congregations. Modeling sustainable behaviors at the church will likely lead to changes in personal and household behavior patterns. Environmental and sustainability partnerships may also bridge generation gaps by allowing youth and younger adults to work on projects that will benefit the whole church as well as offering opportunities for theological reflections on creation, responsible stewardship as well as church and household consumption habits (Owens, 2006).

Conversely, faithful academics may expand the research base on the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of pastors and members in the Black Church, including urban communities. Irwin (2013) speaks of the average lifespan of a church being 70-100 years, which is about the same as the lifespan of a human being. Thus, we are at a point in history where many churches from the 1950s-1970s have aged, and are having difficulties with long-term viability within the church. The fight for social justice also is extremely important. Demanding change at the macrosystem levels, such as elimination of the preschool to prison pipeline, racist practices, health disparities, underemployment, joblessness, and environmental justice are efforts to be undertaken by academic institutions and churches alike.

The more practical aspects of sustainable survival that the small, independent church can learn from academic institutions, the more equipped the church will be for functioning sustainably over the course of a long span of time. These may include partnering with churches to assist them in developing creative and sustainable solutions, spaces for fellowshiping and meeting, grant-writing skills, financial budgets, board development, development of municipal advocacy and negotiation skills, social justice advocacy, and more.

## **Conclusion**

The Black Church and the liberal arts institution have much to offer one another. Formed in response and resistance to enslavement and involuntary servitude, the Black Church is not reaching out to liberal arts institutions; they did not send for us. Alas, for many Black people, these institutions represent the American power structure that delivers intersectional inequities and oppression. In order to traverse barriers constructed via centuries of oppression and violence, Black professors at these institutions and their allies must approach the Black Church with profound faithful and cultural humility rather than with a paternalistic approach that indicates that the liberal arts institution knows what the Black Church needs more than the descendants of a faith that has sustained generations. Although liberal arts academics come in good faith, our missionary-like zeal may be off-putting and misconstrued as threatening. As Black educators, we must engage in introspection and self-reflection to make sure that our intent is and remains

genuine. Our Blackness may open the door for us, but it alone will not sustain a reciprocal relationship.

What the Black Church has sustained for generations may be also instructive to liberal arts institutions, thus forming viable, sustainable, and faithful partnerships. Academic institutions can be helpful by allowing these two major principles to help inform their engagement with faith-based organizations, and empirically research them to test their merits. We are hopeful that approaches such as those we have proposed may help to narrow the ever-widening chasm between faith and works, practical strategies for moving forward, so that churches will not merely survive, but also thrive. Hopefully small, independent churches and other faith-based organizations can increase their ability to model survival and thriving strategies for the health, welfare, and success of their congregations and individual members. Such strategies may help to strengthen small, independent churches, and therefore help to transform urban communities who may be supported and strengthened by them.

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