

The Black Church



**CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES
FACING AFRICAN AMERICAN CONGREGATIONS
IN 21ST CENTURY LOS ANGELES**

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The Black Church Next:

Challenges and Opportunities

Facing African American Congregations

in 21st Century Los Angeles

The transformation
of Los Angeles over
the past 30 years
necessitates the Black
Church finding new
ways to engage an
increasingly diverse
public.

Overview

For generations the church was the stalwart institution in the African American community. From providing assistance to new urban migrants to serving as the social conscience of a nation, the church was Black America's unquestioned guide through much of the 20th century. A site of artistic expression, theological reflection, economic empowerment, and social engagement, in a very real sense, its congregants and leaders helped to define the Black experience.¹

While the historic role of the Black Church is clear, the early 21st century represents a period of transition and transformation. After fighting a number of internal wars over cultural and aesthetic issues like preaching styles, hip hop culture, and the role of new media in worship and practice during the latter part of the 20th century, the new millennium poses a new set of

questions emanating from a number of forces external to the church itself. Including changes in demography, an entrenched economic meltdown, and the election of an African American president, these changes necessitate the Black Church taking a new look at the way it engages the public.

Using the city of Los Angeles as its target, this report hopes to bring into focus a set of finite questions in order to shine a light on some of the challenges and opportunities facing the Black Church in the city and across the nation. Given the high rate of religious participation among African Americans and the city's status as the nation's second largest metropolitan area, observations regarding the Black Church in Los Angeles hold the promise of impacting strategies of religious organization and social engagement nationally.²



Foreword

Like Ezekiel of old, Dr. Daniel Walker invites us to walk with him through a valley of dry bones. It is not yet a graveyard, but the site of a recent battle between two opposing armies that have abandoned the battlefield without taking time to bury the dead.

Then from above we hear the clarion voice of God asking the bewildered prophet, "Son of dust, can these bones live?" This same question is addressed to the present generation of faith-based leadership, as we struggle to reclaim a legacy that throughout history is threatened with annihilation due to unchanging adaptation to changing times. Can we find a way to connect the bones, the dots, so that we may have a new life transferring us into a new century?

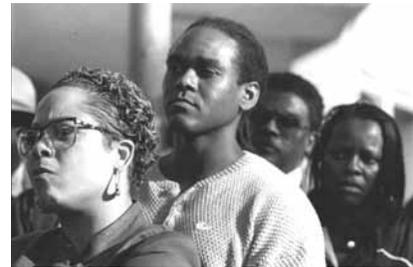
Dr. Daniel Walker, historian, grapples with the question using one segment of the warrior enclave, seasoned veterans of three centuries of struggling for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness: the Black Church. Can the Black Church reinvent itself and adapt to a different time, generation, and culture—or is the Black Church dead?

The author knows that the American shores are open to every belief system on the planet, so you can't paint them all with an ebony brush. He also knows that in the valley of despair the skeletons may be different, but under the skin all people are kin. We all have the same bone marrow making the same blood, and in deficit we all benefit from a new blood transfusion. In each body of faith, we have dry bones to connect and to enliven from the dust of yesterday.

So with all others in the paradigm, the Black Church will be redeemed by sending forth *ruach*, the wind, the breath of God, the same essence that gave us original life in Adam and the resurrection of life in Jesus.

So let us walk with Dr. Daniel Walker, and talk with God our Father as we dialogue with the question from the Black Church segment of the battlefield: Can these bones live?

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1.

Faith-based Social Engagement in 20th Century Los Angeles: A Historic Overview



Building a Community

Like many of its urban counterparts, the city of Los Angeles was impacted greatly by the movement of African Americans out of the South during the middle of the 20th century. Motivated by the economic and social promise of World War II and the West, the city's Black population grew from 63,744 in 1940 to 503,606 by 1970 (U.S. Census Bureau). Hailing primarily from Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma, these migrants created a model of social and religious engagement that was birthed in the Jim Crow South and reached maturity under the bright lights of Hollywood.³

Along with traditional congregations like First African Methodist Episcopal (FAME), Second Baptist, and Emmanuel Church of God in Christ, during this period of growth the burgeoning mass of Black Angelenos spawned a new set of faith communities and religious leaders that spoke to the hopes and aspirations of their congregants. Including Praises of Zion Baptist, Holman United Methodist, St. Brigid Catholic Church, Victory Baptist, Faithful Central, the Church of Christian Fellowship, Greater Bethany, and Zion Hill Baptist, these spaces of worship helped define the cultural, and religious landscape of Black Los Angeles.

In the realm of social and political awareness, organizations like the United Clergy of South Los Angeles, the Interdenominational Alliance, The Black Agenda, and the Western Christian Leadership Conference stood up against police brutality, calmed racial tensions, and provided the base for the heyday of Black electoral politics. African American pastors also held key positions of leadership in the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and routinely hosted the organization's meetings and events. While the strife and destruction of the Watts Riots is often presented as the dominant narrative of Los Angeles during the civil rights movement, often ignored are the efforts of the organized clergy in insuring that the unrest did not spread to other Black enclaves in the city. When 25-year-old Leonard Deadwyler was gunned down by a Los Angeles Police Department officer less than a year later, it was the religious leadership of the Black community that provided economic and

moral support for the victim's family while forcing the city to conduct a full investigation into the practices of the LAPD.⁴

Although the Black religious community was rocked by the violent murders of some of its most visible leaders in the mid 1970s (Arthur Smith, Thurston Frazier, and Arthur A. Peters), it was still able to propel Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, Diane Watson, Maxine Waters, Mervyn Dymally, and Rita Walters to electoral victory. One must never forget that it was the success of the 10th District Recall Committee in 1962, led by First AME's H. Hartford Brookins, which opened the door for the election of Tom Bradley to the Los Angeles City Council a year later.

*A Changing of the Guard:
The L.A. Insurrection and its Effect
on the Black Church in Los Angeles*

The L.A. Riots ended the political career of Tom Bradley and introduced the nation to the new face of Black religious leadership in the city. Leveraging their existing expertise in community redevelopment with the exposure and resources that the civil unrest brought to the city, a handful of large congregations were transformed into "megachurches" providing a myriad of spiritual and social services to the community at large. With membership rolls in the tens of thousands, Crenshaw Christian Center, Faithful Central Bible Church, City of Refuge (formerly Greater Bethany), First AME, and West Angeles Church of God in Christ built senior and low-income housing, opened and expanded schools, and invested money and social capital into the commercial revitalization of South Los Angeles.

Demographic Change and its Effect on the Church

Black Exodus: The Outmigration of African Americans from Los Angeles

In an interesting paradox, the growth of African American megachurches masked the fact that the city was progressively losing its Black population. Highlighting a trend that began in the mid 1980s, this demographic collapse led to a decrease in both the size and number of traditional African American churches and a reconstitution of Black enclaves into cities like Palmdale and Lancaster to the north and Riverside and San Bernardino counties to the east.⁵ When coupled with the movement of large numbers of Latino residents into South Los Angeles, the area looks and feels very different than it did in the 1960s and 1970s.⁶

The flight of African Americans out of Los Angeles presents one of the greatest challenges to the Black Church. Although its 2000 population of more than 415,000 still placed L.A. as the seventh largest Black population center in the U.S., African Americans were only 11.2 percent of the city's population. This percentage ranked 127th among cities with more than 100,000 persons. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000)

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Total Number</i> | <i>Percent of City Population</i> |
|-------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1940 | 63,774 | 4.2% |
| 1950 | 171,209 | 8.7% |
| 1960 | 334,916 | 13.5% |
| 1970 | 503,606 | 17.9% |
| 1980 | 504,674 | 17% |
| 1990 | 487,674 | 13% |
| 2000 | 415,195 | 11.2% |
| 2009 | 371,352 | 9.8% |

(Source: U.S. Census and 2005-2009 American Community Survey)

Preliminary census projections indicate that the total number and overall percentage African Americans in the city will both decrease in 2010. A result of their diminishing numbers, African Americans are now the smallest major ethnic group in the city behind Latinos, whites, and Asians.

Although large numbers of African Americans are leaving the city, they are not necessarily leaving the immediate area. Whereas Compton and Inglewood historically served as the top sites of Black sprawl from Los Angeles, cities like Palmdale (13.7%), Lancaster (18.4%), San Bernardino (16.3%) and Moreno Valley (17.7%) now boast high percentages of African Americans. The vast majority of these residents are transplants from Los Angeles and Compton. (U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2005-09)

COMMENTS While the “pull” of low housing prices is one force driving the outmigration of Blacks from Los Angeles, one cannot discount the effect that mid-1980’s gang wars, the 1992 civil unrest, and a long-standing perception of an anti-Black Los Angeles Police Department had on “pushing” Black residents out of the city. From Police Chief Darryl Gates’ infamous “Batter Ram,” to lead network news stories about Crips, Bloods, drive-by shootings, and crack cocaine, the image of Black Los Angeles as a place in need “resurrection” is still a driving metaphor in the regional and national consciousness. These portrayals of Los Angeles, and more specifically, South Central and Compton, are exacerbated by their stigmatization in American popular culture. Through iconic films like “Boyz n the Hood” and “Menace II Society,” along with the mass appeal of the pioneering rap group NWA and the infamous music label Death Row Records, Black Los Angeles, like Hollywood, became as much a myth as a reality.

QUESTIONS

- How do churches build a long-term agenda in the midst of an ever-moving population base?
- How do faith leaders instill a sense of pride within a stigmatized community?



With song titles like “Gangster Gangster,” “Dopeman,” and the infamous “F-- tha Police,” NWA’s “Straight Outta Compton” garnered both critical acclaim and public outcry for its depictions of urban life.

Immigration and Its Impact on the Black Church in Los Angeles

The New Black Americans

Whereas the traditional Black migrant to Los Angeles came from the American South, the contemporary face of the Black community is increasingly international. Hailing primarily from East and West Africa, Central America, and the Caribbean, these individuals now account for more than 10 percent of the city’s “Black” population (U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey). With Nigeria, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Belize, Honduras, Panama, and Ghana as some of the most common places of origin, these Americans are breathing new life into traditional communities and birthing a number of alternative religious narratives.

For two generations Baptists, Methodists, Black Muslims, and Pentecostals dominated the city’s Black social, political, and religious landscape. Coming from a different historical space, L.A.’s foreign-born Black population includes large numbers of Sufi and Sunni Muslims, Catholics, Presbyterians, Seventh-Day Adventists, and a broad range of independent Charismatic and Evangelical faith communities.

Entering the doors of a sanctuary like Breath of Life Seventh-Day Adventist Church, the diversity of accents and life experiences tell the story of a thriving community where traditional African Americans and first and second generation immigrants worship and organize together.

Whether touring through Little Ethiopia, attending the annual African Marketplace, or witnessing the growing number of chocolate complexioned women wearing hijab on the bus stop, it is clear that a new drum is beating in the heart of the city.

Latinos

Latinos, primarily from Central America and Mexico, are the new face of South Los Angeles and Compton. As opposed to the demographic pattern of the early 1980s, this community is increasingly native born. Defying stereotypes of origin, culture, and religious expression, Latinos are one of the fastest growing groups of Pentecostals in Los Angeles, the nation, and the world.

While it is still true that the vast majority of these individuals are members of the Catholic Church, Latinos, like African Americans, are by no means a monolithic group. Including Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Mexicans and large groups of Black Panamanians, Belizeans, and Hondurans, L.A.'s Latino community is fueled by the social, political, and economic changes that swept through Mexico and Central America during the 1980s and 1990s.

In recent years, tensions between African American and Latino residents, especially at local high schools, paint an increasingly unrealistic picture of conflict and confrontation. To witness another take on the current status between the two groups, one need only visit a local supermarket, public library, and the majority of K-12 classrooms to see the two groups coexisting in a mosaic that showcases new possibilities for the city and nation.

COMMENTS One of the traps that ensnares traditional African American communities as they transition into predominately Latino or Black immigrant communities is their tendency to develop an “us versus them” mindset. Holding onto an unfounded hope that the Black community will somehow regenerate itself through a still undetermined force of nature or social upheaval, African American faith communities at times enable these unconstructive ideas as they struggle to explain decreasing membership rolls, aging congregations, and declining donations. Paranoia around the increasing numbers of Latino students at traditionally Black high schools (e.g. Washington, Dorsey, Crenshaw, Jordan, Locke, and Centennial), the decline of formerly powerful Black spaces of worship, and the large-scale erasure of Black wealth due to falling homes values, provides fuel for this mindset.⁷

While the scenario described above can be the reality that paralyzes the city's Black communities for generations, faith can be the conduit that redirects this angst and anxiety. Using the language of equity, inclusion, and social justice, faith leaders and congregations can become the catalyst for the development of a mental and social outlook that serves as the glue binding a diverse population in 21st century Los Angeles. If these leaders and congregations are able to look past their communal sense of loss and embrace the universal concepts of justice and fairness that helped to define the Black Church for most of its history, they can begin writing a new history for the city and the nation.

While print and broadcast news tend to highlight the flashpoints of division between the two groups, the ever-growing number of English and Spanish signs on church buildings announcing both African American and Latino worship services speak to another reality. For faith leaders and congregations that are willing to stop and talk as their respective congregations trade places on Sunday mornings, there is an opportunity to begin creating relationships of substance. In addition to shared spaces and faith traditions, social engagement around the issues of education and reform of the criminal justice system represent prime areas where the two communities can initiate dialogue and build ministry.

QUESTIONS

- Grounded in theological concepts centered on concern for the stranger, can traditional African American churches become sites of refuge and strength for new immigrants?
- Given the high number of African Americans and Latinos in low-performing schools and the criminal justice system, can a common sentiment of righteous indignation be the conduit for faith-based collaboration between the two groups?



The Declining Rate of Marriage and Its Impact on the Black Church

In addition to the challenges and opportunities brought about by the changing migration patterns of groups into and out of Los Angeles, the Black Church must also contend with one of the other major demographic changes in the Black community over the past 40 years—the declining rate of marriage.

While the drop in marriage rates and changes in attitudes towards marriage are realities for all American racial groups, they are particularly acute in the African American community. According to the U.S. Census, between 1980 and 2000, the percentage of Black adults age 15 and older who have never married rose from 28.5% to 44.9%.

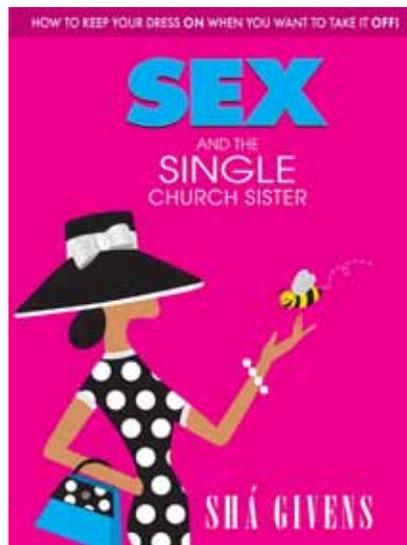
The subject of Stanford University Law Professor Ralph Banks' recent book, *Is Marriage for White People*, the issue has been a topic of anxiety for Blacks, especially women, for a generation. Between 1950 and 2000 the percentage of married Black women declined from 62% to 36.1%. Among white women, the corresponding decline was from 66% to 57.4%.⁸

COMMENTS The general concern regarding the bleak prospects for marriage in the African American community is evident in the success of mainstream authors like Terry McMillan (*Waiting to Exhale* and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*) and a growing throng of faith-based relationship experts, led by Michelle McKinney Hammond (*101 Ways to Get and Keep His Attention; If Singleness is a Gift, What's the Return Policy*). It is also one of the key factors in the monumental rise of the leading African American televangelist T.D. Jakes. Using television, books (e.g. *Loose That Man and Let Him Go; The Lady, Her Lover, and Her Lord; God's Leading Lady*, etc.) and the national distribution of major films like "Woman Thou Art Loosed," "Not Easily Broken," and "Jumping the Broom," Jakes captured the burgeoning anxiety of African American women and built one of the nation's most prominent ministries.

With sales in the millions, these and other authors, ministers, and filmmakers are tapping into a reality that is ever present in African American churches throughout the country. A reflection of a national change in attitudes regarding marriage, high black male incarceration rates, and lingering taboos against interracial relationships, it is incumbent upon faith leaders and congregations to find ways to assist individuals and communities with innovative ways of navigating through these new relational realities.

QUESTIONS

- Are national debates around same-sex marriage distracting attention away from larger shifts in attitudes about marriage generally?
- Given traditional teaching on the subject of marriage, how do faith leaders organize and inspire around changing attitudes towards the institution?



Sex and the Single Church Sister, a book by Los Angeles-based author Sha' Givens, is just one of a host of publications aimed at the unmarried African American female church member.

2.

A House Built on Sand: Economic Challenges to the Viability of the African American Church



The Real Estate Crisis and its Effect on the Black Church

All faith traditions are affected when parishioners lose their jobs and homes. As much a spiritual crisis as a financial one, in times of economic hardship faith leaders and congregations are asked to do more with less. With requests for assistance coming from inside and outside of their defined membership, a large-scale economic downturn places tremendous pressure on all places of worship, irrespective of their ethnic make-up. In the case of African American churches in Los Angeles, California's role as one of the center's of the mortgage foreclosure crisis is having an effect on both weekly donations and the long-term viability of the physical spaces where congregants meet and worship.

Encouraged by increasing donations, many fueled by member's refinancing of their homes, church fortunes became wedded to the highs and lows of the Southern California housing market. Hoping to repair old buildings, expand facilities, and increase space to offer additional social services, artificially elevated balance sheets allowed congregations to qualify for new financial products being offered to religious institutions.

Because Blacks and Latinos were disproportionately saddled with high-risk mortgages, even while they possessed good credit scores, when the housing bubble burst these communities were decimated. For churches, decreasing real estate values and tithes coupled with escalating interest payments and requests for assistance created a firestorm that has yet to be extinguished.⁹

In Los Angeles, the impact of the foreclosure crisis on the economic fortunes of churches is evidenced in the recent trials of Broadway Federal Bank.¹⁰ Founded in 1946, Broadway opened its doors on 43rd and Broadway with a mission to serve the throngs of new Black migrants coming to the city. Soon moving to its flagship headquarters on 45th and Broadway, over the next 60 years it rode the economic and political ebbs and flows of its local community. In 1992 its main office was destroyed during the unrest following the Rodney King verdict.

The bank eventually relocated its headquarters to the Park Mile section of Mid-Wilshire and opened a new branch office on Martin Luther King Blvd. and Figueroa. With nearly one in four of its loans made to churches, Broadway is one of the main lenders to houses of worship in South Los Angeles, Compton, and Inglewood. In response to its deteriorating overall financial status and interventions by federal regulators, Broadway foreclosed on three churches in 2010. In September of the same year, 20 percent of its church loans were at least 30 days past due and 12 percent were more than 90 days late.

COMMENTS While a number of African American churches were able to survive and thrive during the demographic shifts of the 1980s and 1990s, the economic downturn of the 2000s left many formerly successful congregations struggling to enhance revenues, cut expenses, and fashion a message for parishioners trying to make sense of their extreme change of fortune. In addition to the role played by predatory lenders and the decline of the stock market, church leaders and parishioners also must shoulder a share of the blame for their current financial predicament. As the economy begins to show limited signs of recovery, there are ample lessons to be learned from the nation's most recent episode of boom and bust.

For faith leaders, the need to educate themselves and their congregants on the larger workings of credit and debt markets is a lesson that should not be missed. With high levels of credit card debt disproportionately hindering African American household incomes, the church can become the much-needed conduit for educating a wider community about the value of personal saving and educational investment while warning against the perils of speculation and conspicuous consumerism.

QUESTIONS

- Can faith leaders use the lessons learned from the real estate crisis to create a sound economic foundation for the future?
- What constitutes a healthy balance between a message of economic austerity and hopeful financial deliverance?

The Economic Fortunes of Black Women and their Effect on the Black Church

Like many religious traditions women outnumber men in African American churches. In Los Angeles and across the nation, it is their time, talent, and tithes that provide the social and economic base of the Black Church. Given this reality, the economic fortunes of Black women are one of the most significant barometers of the economic health of the 21st century African American church. If information contained in the 2010 study "Lifting as We Climb: Women of Color, Wealth and America's Future" (Insight: Center for Community Economic Development) is any indication, the African American church is on shaky ground.

Centered on the often-ignored question of wealth, the total value of one's assets minus debts, the study found that single Black women have a median wealth of only \$100 and that an astounding 46 percent of all single Black women have zero or negative wealth. Interestingly, even though single African American women have higher graduation,



college attendance, and college completion rates than single Black men, they still lag behind their male counterparts in median household wealth (\$7,900 to \$100). According to the study, “while white women in the prime working years of ages 36-49 have a median wealth of \$42,600, the median wealth for women of color [including Blacks and Latino women] is only \$5.”

COMMENTS While it is true that Black women have a long history of strength, resilience, and innovation in the face of adversity, to cite these facts and dismiss current economic realities would have disastrous effects on both African American women and the Black Church. Given monumental changes in social, familial, and economic relations in Los Angeles and across the nation, new strategies must be enacted to address these realities. Facing their long history of resistance to gender equality in

religious leadership, many faith traditions must begin to engage in advocacy and engagement around the issue of gender equality in the workplace. For African American churches specifically, progress on the issue will have a direct effect on their ability to grow and flourish throughout the 21st century.

QUESTIONS

- Does the historic stand of mainstream religions against gender equality in the sanctuary hinder their ability to be effective advocates for gender equality in the workplace?
- Does the economic self-interest of the Black Church necessitate it taking leadership on the issue of gender equality in the workplace?



3.

Social Engagement in the Age of Obama: Observations for the Black Church



Echoing the activism of the Jena 6 campaign, furor over the “Compton Cookout” at the University of California San Diego showcased the diversity of the state’s 21st century social justice coalition.

Lessons on Social Engagement in the Post-Civil Rights Era

For most of its history, the Black Church served as the spiritual and political center of the African American community. From the strident advocacy of Bishop Henry McNeil Turner, a 19th century AME Bishop, to the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Abernathy, and Malcolm X during the civil rights and Black Power movements, faith-based institutions and their leaders were able to activate their parishioners by articulating both the hopes and dissent of the masses. Without access to traditional fundraising machines, as African Americans moved into the political mainstream they did so with a foundation firmly rooted in the social advocacy, organization models, and financial purse strings of the African American church.

Imbued with religious imagery and symbolism, Barack Obama’s election as President of the United States circumvented many of the traditional strategies of mainstream politics. Using the internet, 24-hour news networks, and cell phones to spread the message, many of the strategies employed during the 2008 campaign were first showcased in organizing efforts regarding the Jena 6 case.

The Incident

In December 2006, a white student was attacked by a group of African American students in the small town of Jena, Louisiana. Although the victim attended the school dance later that evening, the perpetrators of the incident were eventually charged with attempted murder for their role in the incident. For many African Americans, the decision to charge the minors with the maximum sentence possible echoed the historic and contemporary abuses so often visited upon African American males in the criminal justice system.

The Response

While the mainstream media generally ignored the story, a new generation of African Americans took to the internet to draw interest to the case. On September 20, 2007, upwards of 20,000 people, drawn primarily from social networks such as Facebook and the encouragement of nationally syndicated radio personalities Tom Joyner, Michael Basden, and Steve Harvey, descended on the city to voice their displeasure with the proceedings.

COMMENTS In addition to providing specific evidence of the power of social networking and an increasingly unified national Black radio audience, the case of the Jena 6 also provided the first act in a dramatic battle between the traditional African American religious establishment and a new generation of social activists tied to the Internet, syndicated radio, and the candidacy of Barack Obama.

Encompassing showdowns with Jesse Jackson, Bill and Hillary Clinton, and Obama's former pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, the new generation of African American social activists confronted and defeated symbol after symbol of the traditional Black political and religious establishment. Nowhere was this victory more evident than in the 2008 California Democratic primary. Although rival Hilary Clinton lined up every major Black political and religious endorsement in Los Angeles, the African American community rejected the "wisdom" of the establishment and gave Obama 86 percent of their vote. (The 2008 Leavay Center Presidential Primary Exit Poll)

QUESTIONS

- Is there still a role for traditional faith-based social activism in 21st Century Los Angeles?
- Can social networking and the Internet be used to create a sustainable faith-based social justice movement?



The Faith of Obama

Consequences and Opportunities for the Black Church

The election of Barack Hussein Obama as the 44th President of the United States of America was a watershed moment for both the nation and the Black Church. In addition to its obvious historic and political significance, the election also signaled the arrival of a new and powerful spiritual voice for African American communities. More than just the employment of a key religious phrase or scriptural reference, Obama's "A More Perfect Union" discourse also showcased the Illinois Senator as an accomplished preacher. Delivered in the midst of a national hysteria centered on comments made by his former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, Obama's oration was the most compelling national "preaching" moment since Martin Luther King's "I Have Dream" address in 1963.

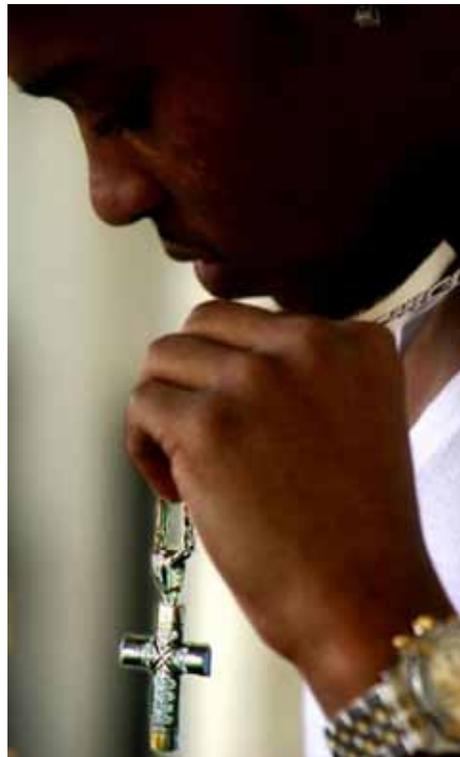
When coupled with his victorious "Yes We Can" speech the night he won the election, the pilgrimage of hundreds of thousands of African Americans to the Presidential Inauguration, and the "eulogy/praise service" he delivered in January 2011 following a shooting spree in Arizona, there are very few faith leaders, irrespective of race and religious tradition, that can rival his homiletic prowess or popular appeal.

COMMENTS Nearly 20 percent of African Americans who attend church in Los Angeles are members of just five congregations—The Crenshaw Christian Center, Faithful Central Bible Church, West Angeles Church of God in Christ, First AME, and the City of Refuge. Given the past history of the Black Church as the training ground for both sacred and secular leaders, it is still unknown how the concentration of so many of the city's African American residents in so few spaces will affect the community in the coming years.

While one might lament this change in social organization as a sign that the Black community will be without an ample supply of advocates in the future, this new reality may also signal that African Americans are now quite comfortable with leaders culled from the traditional fields of business and government service. As evidenced by the election of Governor Duvall Patrick in Massachusetts and the existence of a host of other Black politicians and non-profit administrators throughout the country, many serving constituencies that are not majority African American, it seems quite evident that in the 21st Century religious ordination is by no means the only pathway to relevancy in the hearts and minds of Black communities.

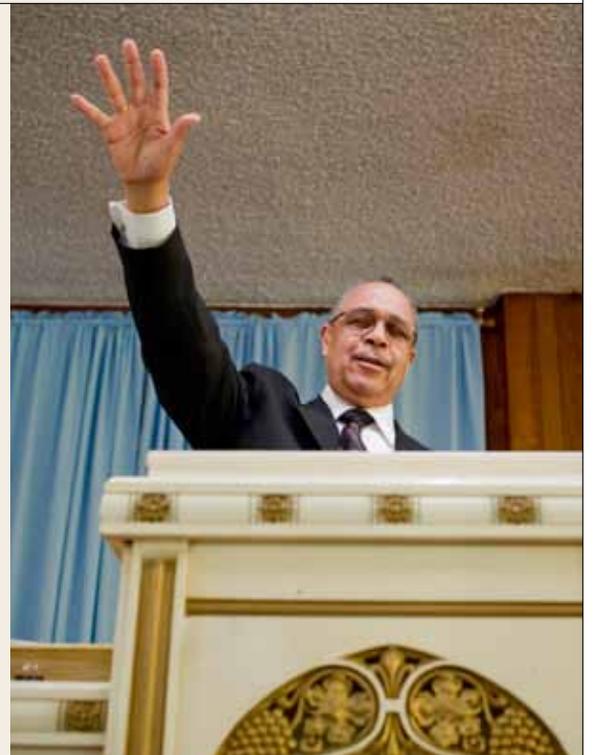
QUESTIONS

- Does the status of Barack Obama as both a spiritual and political figure undermine the influence of African American faith leaders?
- How do faith leaders balance their support for President Obama with the doctrinal mandates of their respective faith traditions?



4.

The Future



Despite lingering vestiges of structural racism, an entrenched economic downturn, and changing community demographics, a 2011 Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation-Harvard University poll found that 85 percent African Americans were still optimistic about the future.¹² In addition to this generalized hope, another 59 percent felt that America's best years were yet to come. Citing the Presidency of Barack Obama as one of the key reasons for their optimism, African Americans were easily the most hopeful demographic in the nation.

It is this considerable "asset of spirit" that faith leaders and congregations in Los Angeles must recognize, appreciate, and nurture. While it is easy to assume that the grass is indeed greener in other religious, historic, or racial pastures, the reality is that the African American church is still one of the most important social and religious institutions in the city and nation.

With a community whose numbers would rank it as one of America's most populous cities if it stood alone, faith leaders must mine the well of spiritual renewal that allows them to shape a rhetoric and ministry that views Los Angeles, and its Black religious community, as one of opportunity and promise. Although it is very true that the city has changed considerably over the past four decades, those immersed in the work of faith must embrace change as a sign of vibrancy and life.

As the church looks to the future it must recognize that in addition to coming from a space of historic relevance it still maintains a lofty place in the hearts and minds of African Americans. Moving deeper into the 21st century, its ability to inspire and organize its considerable human assets, in spite of new challenges, will be the key to maintaining that status.

In the most appropriate laboratory for the country's yet-to-be-perfected experiment in both diversity and democracy, Los Angeles faith leaders of all races and traditions share a heavy burden. Unlike their forerunners who lived in a social space defined by a black/white racial and social discourse, the 21st century requires a spiritual and political understanding that exists alongside a myriad of languages, racial backgrounds, and religious traditions. In this new reality, the common denominators must be a love for humanity, search for truth, and embrace of justice—not just for African Americans, but for all of God's people.

It is this faith space that the African American church must inhabit if it expects to remain relevant. Locking hands across gender, language, class, and plethora of "isms," it is the inclusive Black Church, steeped in history yet never enslaved by it, that will birth a more just and equitable city, nation, and world.



NOTES

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**ABOUT THE
CENTER FOR RELIGION
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The Center for Religion and Civic Culture at USC was founded in 1996 to create, translate, and disseminate scholarship on the civic role of religion in a globalizing world. CRCC engages scholars and builds communities in Los Angeles and around the globe. Its innovative partnerships link academics and the faith community to empower emerging leaders through programs like the Passing the Mantle Clergy and Lay Leadership Institute, for African American church leaders, and the American Muslim Civic Leadership Institute. The Center also launched the USC Cecil Murray Center for Community Engagement, which strengthens the capacity of faith-based organizations and develops community leadership skills. Since its inception, the Center has managed over \$25 million in grant-funded research from corporations, foundations, and government agencies. In 2002, CRCC was recognized as a Pew Center of Excellence, one of ten university-based research centers. Currently, the Center's work is organized around eight areas of expertise, including international scholarship; non-governmental organizations and civil society; religion and generations; religion in Southern California; religion, diversity, and pluralism; scholarly resource development; and visual documentation of religion. CRCC houses more than 20 research initiatives on topics such as Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity, the transmission of religious values across generations, faith-based non-governmental organizations, and the connection between spirituality and social transformation. The Center for Religion and Civic Culture is a research unit of the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts & Sciences.

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