



YOUTH DAY (YOUTH AND HEALTH)

CULTURAL RESOURCE

Sunday, October 25, 2009

Tammy L. Kernodle, Guest Cultural Resource Commentator

Associate Professor of Musicology, Miami University, Oxford, OH, and

Ralph Wheeler, Guest Cultural Resource Commentator

Attorney, poet and long-time civil rights activist, Oakland, CA

Lecture - 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; Proverbs 3: 5-8

I. Introduction

In recent years, the subject of the health and well-being of black youth has been a large part of the national discourse. A recent study shows that more than 40% of African American teenagers are overweight, and better than half of these students are obese.¹ A 2005 study by the University of Michigan showed that 67% of American middle schools and 83% of high schools provided students with access to soft drinks all day long. These schools had contracts with soft drink bottling companies.² Is it any wonder

that are youth are obese, with so much sugar in their schools, followed by ingestion of junk food throughout the day?

Of the estimated 18,849 people under the age of twenty-five whose diagnosis of HIV/AIDS was made during 2001–2004, in the thirty-three states with HIV reporting, 11,554 (61%) were black.³ According to Glen Ellis, Executive Director of Blackdoctors.org, “An alarming 65% of boys and 75% of girls in juvenile detention have at least one mental health disorder. We are incarcerating youth with mental disorders, some as young as eight years old, rather than identifying their disorders early and intervening with appropriate treatment. Early and effective mental health treatment can prevent a significant proportion of delinquent and violent youth from future violence and crime.”⁴

Despite the growth of “abstinence only” programs, teen pregnancy has slowed, but only slightly and the level of African American teens with STDs is still on the rise. The most severely affected are African-American teen girls. Forty-eight percent of African-American teenaged girls have an STD, compared with 20% of white teenaged girls.⁵ Television shows, movies, videos and music have indoctrinated our children to not see their bodies as “temples” but as vehicles of carnality.

Physical inactivity, poor nutritional habits (i.e., high-fat meals, unhealthy snacks, and super-sizing), economic, and social factors have all contributed to this generation’s health crisis. But, most of all, much of the unhealthiness of our youth reflects a lack of knowledge on their part, on the part of their parents, and on the part of churches. During the installation services of Reverend Otis Moss, III at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, the founder and director of the Children’s Defense Fund, Marian Wright Edelman, said that when she is asked, “What is wrong with our children?” her response is, “Adults are what’s wrong with our children.”⁶

In response to the grim statistics, some churches have organized youth ministries that extend beyond the traditional youth choir, usher board or young disciples groups that defined past youth ministry. Traditional Bible studies, in some churches, now include discussions about life choices, teen pregnancy and AIDS. Some churches have even gone as far as to organize black college tours in an effort to present different life choices as alternatives to the unhealthy behaviors that surround so many youth. But, one of the main ways in which many of these congregations have tried to reach youth is through youth services and revivals that encourage participants to voice their experiences through songs, raps, poetry, visual art and dance.

II. What Will Make Our Youth Healthy?

Since these risk factors are well known by many African American adults and would be rattled off if they were asked to name what’s hurting our youth, why do the numbers keep getting worse? One reason is that black churches have failed to act upon the fact that many of the risk factors are directly related to parenting and, then, fail to provide assistance to parents, especially single parents, young parents, poor parents, and parents

with little formal education. Yes, Edleman is correct, adults are what's wrong. From those adults who run corporations that feed poison to youth, to those adults who allow their children to ingest the poison, to those adults who could teach other adults how to parent and do not—"adults are what's wrong with our children."

The foods that youth eat are most often paid for by adults. Children are most often sent to school, or allowed not to attend school, by adults. Children are disciplined properly, improperly, or not at all, by adults. So, what will make our youth healthy? While there is no panacea, what will go a long way is positive participation in the lives of youth by adults. Youth need adults who will not finance bad food for them. Youth need adults who will not let them sit for hours on end in front of televisions or video games. Youth need adults who will not allow them to fail in school or stand idle on street corners. While it would be wonderful if every parent would take responsibility for their children and properly rear them, this is a fantasy or, best case scenario, something that will take several generations to make a reality.

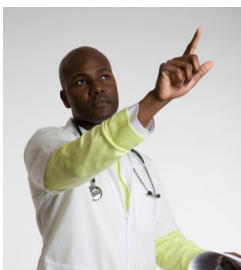
What can the black church do immediately? Every church, urban or rural, denominationally affiliated or non-denominational, can at a minimum:

Offer Parenting Classes

Many of today's parents are at a loss when it comes to rearing children. The parents have had poor or no role models. They are under-educated or uneducated when it comes to rearing children; and, they are working in jobs that pay poorly or, worse, are not working at all. All state and many local entities offer free parenting classes. Departments of Children and Family Services, Health Departments, and others would like nothing more than to go to churches and provide parenting classes. However, many churches never ask; or, one or two churches ask instead of having pastors work collaboratively to provide classes for five or ten churches at one time. This is a major indictment against the black church. We can no longer sit back and hurl insults at inept parents and do nothing more. Most of the parents who need the classes may not attend your church. However, that is not the issue. They need help. This is why churches exist: to serve those in need.

Begin making calls to your local and state authorities today to get the assistance parents in your community need, especially young parents, single parents, and poor parents. Set up a parenting one-stop center, bringing under one tent all of the professionals and service providers who are critical to healing our children and families. Have professionals do the training and let the training be about the parents and their children. This is not a time for the church to push scripture, religion or itself. It is an occasion for the church to be proactive in saving children and families. Once families have been rescued, then the church can afford to move to religious training.

Offer Regular Health Seminars and Classes



Again, all state and many local entities offer health seminars and classes on everything from basic pediatric care for children to how to prepare low-cost healthy meals. But churches do not contact them. Your church can change this. Contact every entity in your city

that provides professionals who can help children and parents obtain healthy life-styles. These are seminars and classes that **MUST** focus on youth health. While they will involve parents, they will only be the focus as they are being trained to be health conduits for their children. Begin making calls today to reach the professionals who can assist you. Advertise well. Technology will greatly aid in your efforts. Radio stations love promoting these types of efforts and so do local television stations.

These classes and seminars should be open to everyone in your community. Compel persons to come. Do not get discouraged if initially only a few attend. People are not used to receiving this type of assistance and may not believe it will work. However, if you and your church make this a priority, the community will, too. Also, work with other churches. Denominational affiliation, or lack thereof, is not the issue here—saving youth is the issue. Focus on that as you reach out to others to join you in your efforts.

Offer GED Classes or Help Those Who Do



Throughout this cultural resource unit, it has been made clear that adults need help. Education always aids people to assist children. Meaning that the more we educate parents, the more we assist their children. It has long been said that individuals without basic education, meaning a high school diploma in the United States, are at risk for being poor and unemployed. With recent changes in the economic conditions around the world, it is clear that people need even more education than they once did. A high school education, especially one that is received from a mediocre high school, does little for individuals seeking sustained employment today. Again, the Church can make the difference.

Too many African American parents cannot read, write, and perform basic mathematical computations, such as balancing their checkbook. With cuts in education, the black church is again needed to stand in the gap and educate another generation. At the end of slavery and during Reconstruction, the black church made it possible for hundreds of thousands of black Americans to achieve basic literacy. This was done under dangerous and hostile circumstances. Today, all we need is the will.

School systems throughout America are broke or are going broke. Many of these systems provide GED classes. What will adults do when they close? Also, many African American adults do not take advantage of GED classes. Why not make your church an education leader? Partner with entities that provide GED classes to help get adults enrolled. Work with entities that are facing foreclosure to help them gain financial stability. If your church cannot become a site that offers GED classes, at least adopt a GED site. It may be a community college that offers GED classes or a technical school. Whatever the case, why not make a pledge that your church will assist a program (or several programs) in ensuring that one hundred adults receive their GED each year?

Adopt an Elementary School



Study after study has shown that the quicker a person receives positive intervention, the better their chances for becoming a healthy adult who is a positive contributor to society. Accordingly, black youth must be reached at the elementary school level, at least. The fact of the matter is that no matter how much is done to assist parents, too many will not be reached for so many reasons. So, while the optimum would be for churches to begin at the kindergarten level and work with children through the eighth grade, we must begin somewhere, especially given the absence of parents in some cases. The elementary school level is an age group with which church members may feel comfortable. Contact the elementary school nearest your church and talk to them about adopting their school. Work with school personnel to find out what is needed and what you can do. Visit the web for numerous sites that provide information from churches and other groups that have adopted a school. Get the information you need to be successful. However, do not fall victim to paralysis due to over analysis that causes you to drag out the process until all agree and everything is in place. A few willing workers who have met with the pastor, school leaders, and others who have adopted an elementary school, along with basic research, is all you need to begin.

Become a Latch-Key Site



Numerous studies have also shown that many youth get in trouble between the hours of 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. because they are without parental or other adult supervision. Those youth who are alone at home or on streets during these periods need safe latch-key sites, where they can go to simply wait for their parents. Given all of the retired and unemployed adult church members who are inactive during the hours of 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., numerous churches could serve as safety zones for latch-key children. Even if your church can only provide tables and chairs for children to be seated and do homework, that will be a great start. Again, the web is full of websites that can help you set up a latch key program.

III. Songs that Speak to the Moment

“Lord Prepare Me” is a popular praise and worship song used in many churches. There are various versions, and the song is performed both in a slow reflective manner and as an upbeat song of praise. It suggests to youth that their bodies are temples, sanctuaries of God. The song, “Give Me a Clean Heart,” has become a standard in churches. It is a plea to God and shows an understanding of the connection between what is in our hearts (minds) and our behavior. The third song, “You Can Use Me,” is used in instances where persons may not believe that they are worthy of being instruments of God’s work, this is often the case among youth, especially youth with low self-esteem.

Lord Prepare Me

Lord prepare me to be a sanctuary
Pure and Holy, tried and true
And with thanksgiving,

I'll be a living sanctuary for you.⁷

Give Me a Clean Heart

Give me a clean heart. So I may serve Thee
Lord fix my heart so that I may be used by Thee.
For I'm not worthy of all these blessings.
Give me a clean heart and I'll follow Thee.⁸

Use Me

If you can use anything Lord, you can use me (2xs)
Take my hand Lord and my feet. Touch my heart Lord, speak to me.
If you can use anything Lord you can use me.

Verse three

I remember a story, I remember it well
He took a shepherd boy, David, with a sling in his hand
He took the rock with the sling in his hand
Flung the rock and the giant fell dead
And I know if You can use anything, You can use me

[Bridge:]

Take my hands and my feet
Touch my heart, speak through me

[Chorus].⁹

The fourth song, "Time for a Change," is sung by the youth group, 21:03. The group consists of three young men—Torrence Greene, Jor'el Quinn and Evin Martin. They represent a new generation of gospel artists. The song explores some of the experiences facing youth today—experiences that contribute to and exacerbate the unhealthiness of our youth.

Time for a Change

He's 11 years old and he can't read
but knows every song on the radio.
Ask him 'bout what his dreams are and you will see they're limited to
what he sees on B.E.T.
Now I know what you're thinking.
Wait just let me finish. He's been a victim of a crime led by politicians.
We can't stand back and watch another suffer.
Gotta stand up and fight the system,
teach our brother.

14 years old no self esteem comparing her body to magazines.
Seeks attention from boys at school to tell her she's cute and try
And make a move. No father at home to tell her she's beautiful.

Momma's working late just to keep the fridge full.
Nine months later Tina's got a baby.
They pushed her out the church, ain't been to service lately.

Chorus: Throw your hands up if its time to make a move.
Throw your hands up stop talking, let's show and prove
Throw your hands up, Church we got a job to do.¹⁰

IV. What Happens When the Black Church Helps Youth, Two Stories

(A) Yvonne Hicks is currently completing a MA in Vocal Performance at Miami University. In the years following her matriculation at Alabama A&M University, she studied voice with Richard Tucker and Ginger Beazley, and competed in a number of vocal competitions before coming to Miami University where I teach. In this material, she recounts how her early years and the role that the church played in her development, as a black woman and as a musician, helped her avoid unhealthy behaviors, although they abounded in her environment. Ms. Hicks indicates:

Morning Glory Missionary Baptist Church, in Huntsville, Alabama, consumes much of my childhood memories. It was a fairly large congregation that consisted of affluent blacks that worked for Alabama A&M University and working class people, who worked hard to make a comfortable life for themselves. My parents attended the church and they were very involved in the church. My dad was on the usher board, and my mom helped when they had teas or Pastor Appreciation programs. She also worked in the church kitchen. My brother and I were fortunate to have attended Morning Glory, because it, along with the influence of our parents, greatly affected our development as young children. When I think back, I know we were really blessed to have people who really cared about us and were interested in what we were doing.

I remember, in the youth choir we had these two ladies that looked out for the youth—Louise Brandon and Alicia Powell. Mrs. Brandon was a librarian. She didn't have any kids—I guess we were her kids. And I don't know what Ms. Powell did. I think she was a teacher. They were like your second mommas or your aunts. They were the women who would get with you, when you weren't doing right and your parents weren't around. Ms. Powell was always really fun and everybody liked her, even though you knew she was no joke. They didn't direct the choir, but were like advisors or coordinators for the choir. Luther Washington directed the choir and played for the group. The three of them shaped the youth experience at Morning Glory, especially Mrs. Brandon who would make it a point to call each child by name and hug them.

As far as participating in church, there was no question about whether we would be in the youth choir. If you were a certain age—you were in the youth choir. You were expected to be there on Monday nights for rehearsal; and, if you weren't there, they wanted to know where you were. They took a lot of care with us and

had high expectations of us. We knew what we were singing about. It wasn't "let's sing this because it's popular." The songs we sang had relevance to our lives. And, we were expected to be ready on Sunday.

They expected us to be in Sunday school and to be there on time and in place when worship began. It bred a sense of togetherness among the youth even though we did not attend the same schools. They taught us discipline even though we had a good time. They taught us the importance of being on time and carrying yourself a particular way. They had standards. Every youth wanted to be in the choir, even if you couldn't sing. They would find you a spot somewhere; they didn't care if you thought you couldn't sing. They were going to find a part that you could sing and work with you until it worked out. They made it fun and interesting. I felt loved, and the youth department was a safe place. I felt that they cared about me. If you didn't show up they called, and all of the parents supported the youth.

My pursuit of music as a vocation started there. I found my voice to sing there. Luther Washington, the musician, taught at my high school and that impacted me a great deal. He was classically trained and helped me believe I could study music as well. I had thought of studying music formally, because teachers had talked with my parents about my singing abilities; but his encouragement helped me greatly. He never put any limits on me. When you have someone who takes an interest in you, it makes you feel like you can do anything. When I sang, people clapped and eventually I became known as "a singer." I began to live that role. I saw myself as a singer, because I received encouragement to keep doing what I was doing. The diverse musical experience at Morning Glory allowed me to find a place in the worship. On any given Sunday we performed anthems, hymns, Negro spirituals and gospel music; so, there was something for everyone. Where other churches in the city strictly concentrated on Gospel music, Morning Glory offered a diverse musical experience. So, for me, singing in a more operatic style was not unusual, because it appealed to some people in the congregation. I came into my own there. I developed my sense of self being there amongst other young girls and the women of the church, who guided me.

When I got ready to go to college, it was natural for me to go to Alabama A&M, because I believed that I had community and church support that made staying in Huntsville comfortable. My years at A&M were just as important, in terms of my development as an artist, musician, and a young adult. But, I will always know that it was my parents and Morning Glory that led me through my teen years, in ways that left me healthy, saved, and believing that I could achieve my dreams.

(B) The following story is the testimony of a young man named Trey. His story is one that is all too familiar—a black boy, in a broken home without a father. But it also speaks to how contemporary approaches to youth ministry are transforming the lives of individuals who are no longer exposed to church culture from an early age. Trey is finishing high

school next year and has gone from having truancy issues to being a “B” student. His hope is to attend a black college and major in business:

There aren't many things I can say are a constant in my life. I haven't lived that long; so, I guess it will be awhile before I know the full impact that attending Mt. Moriah Missionary Baptist Church will have on my life. But, right now, I can tell you that this church and the people here have made a tremendous difference in my life. You see, I'm not growing up in the best household situation. For that matter, I wasn't born in an ideal situation. My pops skipped out when I was just a baby. He and my mom didn't get along. Well, at least that's what I've heard from the little bit she says about him. His leaving didn't just change my life; but, hers too, I guess, was never the same. She rarely smiles anymore and when she talks she's generally screaming. I thought that was the way grown people talked to kids before I started attending Mt. Moriah. Church was never on my mind, before my friends started talking about the youth ministry there. It's not that I thought church was boring or anything—it's just that my mom never went; so, it wasn't something that ever occurred to me. Yeah, I watched people drive up and go in the doors on Sundays. I stood on the street corner near the church, hanging with my homies. It never occurred to me before some kids at my school, who lived in the neighborhood, started talking about the things they were doing in church. They always had some meeting or rehearsal to attend; so, they really weren't about hanging on the corner. I can't say I was a hood or a thug. I didn't hang on the corner because I was slinging. I just didn't have much else to do and there was always somebody out there running game, and dropping street wisdom.

So when Darryl, who lived a couple of houses down from me, invited me to his church's Youth Explosion, at first I said, "Naw." It just wasn't my style. I saw the kind of clothes people had on, going into that church; and, I just didn't think I would fit in. And, I wasn't sure about all that God stuff. Now, that I think about it, I didn't have any idea of what church was really about. But, Darryl wouldn't let up. He told me I could wear my hoodies and jeans and no one would say anything. I just needed not to sag (i.e. wear my pants baggy to the point that my underwear was exposed). He talked about the rappers that would be there and the fact that he was in the youth choir and the mime ministry. I had no idea what he was talking about, as it related to mime; and, the thought of people rapping in church blew me away. I couldn't imagine anyone dropping a verse that the church people would like. But, I admit it now, I was interested. So, I decided to go; and, if it didn't appeal to me, I would bounce.

My life was completely changed that Friday night. I had no idea that church could be so live and that I would understand what was going on. They had these young girls doing a dance routine that was like ballet--I later found out this was praise dancing. But what really got me was this guy named Dre. He did this rap called, "I Made It," and it rocked. I mean he was dropping some strong rhymes, but they were all about his struggles and how God had helped him make it through. I didn't know this was what church was about. And, I couldn't believe that people

my age were talking about trusting in God and not giving in to pressures to have sex and do drugs. You know, we all hear that stuff about “just say no,” but I had never known people who actually believed in that. I just remember being overwhelmed by everything. Then, Darryl and some other boys came out with their faces painted and they did this dance—but it wasn’t quite dancing. I later found out this is what miming is. It was off “da” hook. And, I knew right then I would be coming back.

I’m not going to lie and say that I kept coming back right away. But, every now and then when my moms was screaming or passed out drunk on a Sunday morning, I would walk around the corner and grab a seat in the back. At first, I thought people were going to hate on me, ‘cause of the way I was dressed, and, ‘cause they didn’t know me. I see how old ladies grab their purses and hold on to them when I pass them on the street. But I ain’t never jacked nobody. They think we’re all gangsters ‘cause we dress a certain way. But they treated me like everyone else and started asking about me—who I was and my name. After a while, I felt like they cared. The more I went, the more I got involved. So, when Darryl told me about Joshua’s Army, a youth program where the older men of the church do social activities with young men, I decided to go. It changed my life; seeing other examples of black men, I decided to make some changes in my life.

That was three years ago and I’m still active in it. I joined the church and I got baptized last summer. My moms didn’t come, but Mr. Rick, the man who became my mentor through Joshua’s Army, was standing there when they lifted me out of the pool. If it wasn’t for Mr. Rick, I wouldn’t have thought of going to college or doing anything more than slinging rock [i.e. crack] and hanging on the corner. But, last spring break, the church sponsored a black college tour and some people at the church paid for me to go. I didn’t know they had colleges like the ones I saw. I want to go to a black college down south. Get away from here and all of the bad influences. I’m even doing better in school. Mr. Rick said, if I get into a college he will help me go. You know, I used to be angry that my pops left me and never looked back, and never came to see about me. But, Mr. Rick and the church really helped me deal with that. It still hurts, but I’m determined to be a better man. I’m going to be something. Going to Mt. Moriah changed my life and taught me that I could be cool, and be a Christian too.

V. Resources to Help Your Church Work with Youth

1. The Black Church Initiative is a web-based resource that assists both laity and clergy in addressing issues of health and sexuality with African American youth. Online location: Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. “National Black Church Initiative.” [Multicultural Programs Department. www.rcrc.org/programs/blackchurch.cfm](http://www.rcrc.org/programs/blackchurch.cfm) accessed 10 May 2009
2. The Youth and Religion Project (Y&RP), funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc. from 1996 until 2003, was designed to provide church leaders with ways that religious

institutions can serve the needs of younger Americans (aged 8 to 30). The project's website is still functional and consists of modules designed to address major issues of interest to youth and those who work with youths. Online location:

<http://www.uic.edu/depts/soci/yrp/comp/pages/home.html> accessed 10 May 2009

VI. Books and Articles for Pastors, Youth Directors and Christian Educators

1. David Briggs, a reporter for the Cleveland Plain Dealer, chronicles one inner city church's struggle to be more vital to the surrounding community. The segment of the series that addresses youth and the black church is called, "Upon this Corner: The Black Church in the City." The article's online location is:

www.cleveland.com/religion/index.ssf/2008/12/innercity_black_churches_strug.html accessed 10 May 2009

2. Yusef , Malik. Am I the Last Virgin?: Ten African American Reflections on Sex and Love. New York, NY: Simon Pulse, 1997.

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16. Uehara, E.S. "African-American Youth Encounters with Violence: Results from the Community Mental Health Council Violence Screening Project." Journal of Black Studies 26 (1995):768-781.

Notes

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2. "New Studies Show Children Surrounded by Unhealthy Options." Institute for Health Research and Policy. Online location: <http://ihrp.uic.edu/content/new-studies-show-children-surrounded-unhealthy-options> accessed 20 May 2009
3. United States Department of Health and Human Services. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. HIV/AIDS Surveillance in Adolescents and Young Adults (Through 2007). Slide Series. 14 May 2009 Online location: <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/surveillance/resources/slides/adolescents/index.htm> accessed 20 May 2009
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5. For statistics announced during the 2008 National STD Prevention Conference of the CDC see, United States. Department of Health and Human Services. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2008 National STD Prevention Conference Confronting Challenges, Applying Solutions. Online location: <http://www.cdc.gov/STDConference/2008/media/release-11march2008.htm> accessed 10 May 2009

6. Contact Trinity United Church of Christ at 400 West 95th Street, Chicago, Illinois 60628 for information on obtaining copies of DVDs of the installation service for Reverend Otis Moss III which contain the comments given by Marian Wright Edleman.
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