

A Charge to the Black Church: 3 Things the Church Can Do in 2013

by Le' Roi L. Gill

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A prevailing view, held by clergy and lay leaders, is that the Black Church is like an ocean liner that moves slowly and is not given to sharp and sudden turns. Certainly, any turn-on-a-dime movement or hasty change in course could be harmful to a faith community, but an unwillingness to alter its course by even 90 degrees can result in the same fate as the once-celebrated Titanic.

Churches have failed to find a way to steer the Old Ship of Zion on a new course while remaining faithful to the gospel message. With few exceptions, the Black Church has either misunderstood or ignored the potent impact of pop-culture on our youth and underestimated the influence of technology on our society. The Black Church also desperately needs to understand the demographic changes of the country; otherwise, it risks further dilution of its relevancy in a multi-cultural nation.

This paper will propose three areas of ministry that will be essential for the Black Church in 2013, if it is to fulfill the biblical mandate of being the Kingdom of Heaven on earth for this generation.

1. We must reclaim our legacy.

In this Post-Civil Rights era, the African American community has become increasingly fragmented. The gains of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s produced greater social integration into

mainstream society. The unforeseen consequence has been a social stratification of the black community.

Eugene Robinson's *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America* cogently argues that we no longer have a unified black community. Given the economic and other shifts, Robinson contends that modern blacks are in one of four categories: Transcendent, Mainstream, Emergent, or Abandoned.¹ Under his construct, the black mainstream produced the modern Civil Rights movement, but those voices are vanishing and being replaced by an emergent generation who has no allegiance to the church or the cause of civil rights.

The year 2013 provides a *kairos* moment to reawaken the black community to its commitment to continue black nation-building. January 1, 2013 marks the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. Although it's an historic achievement for the nation, it also provides the African American church a unique opportunity to once again reclaim our glorious heritage of liberation.

Every month should be celebrated by the Black Church as Black History Month, and we can begin by rediscovering the roots of the Black Church, beginning with its Hush Harbors, where we first worshiped. Celebrating the victory of President Barak Obama's second term is important, but the underside to his narrative is that the black community continues to suffer with double-digit unemployment, and legislative gains made in the past are now being attacked. Without a full and accurate understanding of our history, the Millennial Generation will have no commitment to or vested interest in defending our past victories or in ending current societal inequities that will lessen things such as black unemployment.

Unless the Black Church develops a commitment to the preservation of our history, it will undoubtedly be forgotten. A related place to start is the formation of an archives ministry.

The ministry should be given the task of tracing the history of the local church, with special emphasis on its role in social justice actions. Unearthing the past can revive a people, as we often expect revival services to do in the life of congregations.

Today there is a demoralizing downgrade in the quality of preaching that I believe is an outgrowth of the individualism and greed of the post-modern era. The attractiveness of the prosperity gospel is the capitalist model for the Church. The message is clear: the more material goods you have, the more blessed you are. This is counter-cultural to the Black Church of the 1800s and early 1900s and destructive to building community and caring for the poor.

In his book *American Grace*, social scientist Robert Putnam explores the question of how the church in America has changed. In a nationwide survey, he found that 32 percent of Americans who belonged to a congregation reported hearing sermons with political content as often as once every month or two. By 2011, that dropped to 19 percent.²

This deradicalization of the Church has been detrimental to the black community in general and the Black Church in particular. Retracing our legacy will enlighten black Protestants to the reality that the Black Church has a history of being in the forefront of social change dating back to the likes of Gabriel Prosser, Nat Turner, and Harriet Tubman.

2. We must construct an inter-generational theology and transforming liturgy.

Today, I believe black churches, for the most part, are either too old or too young. A healthy congregation, whether it's a small church or a mega-church, is one where a balance is maintained between elders and the young.

Black Protestants can build an intergenerational theology by reforming their evangelism pursuits and their liturgy. Too often our messages, the music, and our church interests reflect

profoundly outdated practices. First, if we want an intergenerational church, our evangelism plans must be, designed accordingly. Second, since the purpose of liturgy is to activate the faith of worshippers and empower them to carry out the gospel mission of liberation, it is critical that the church evaluate its practices in this area. Our church rituals have been reduced to a rigidly performed weekly exercise that makes them void of robust spiritual dimension through which lives can truly be transformed.

Augusto Boal, a follower of the reform educator Paulo Freire, has written that theater is the space for the liberation of oppressed people. He argues that most contemporary institutions function to maintain the power dynamic where the few dominate the masses of people. Boal advocates for theatrical acts that provide critical thinking on the human condition and rehearses social action that is rooted in a collective analysis that leads to shared problem solving.³

Viewing the Black Church as “spiritual theater,” leaders should create worship and teaching moments that speak to the struggles of oppression that confront the black community, such as family violence, drug abuse, unemployment, and racism. These events should be created with the participation of youth and elders where the dialogue reflects the challenges that both are facing.

We should also view the liturgy as a participatory celebration that engages all generations. Every week young people should be serving as junior officers and/or shadowing seniors to better understand the culture of the church and why certain practices have survived many generations. The Church is God’s community on earth and the community must be comprised of all segments to reflect the Kingdom of God. The vision of the Church is to realize the personality of God and the solidarity of the church as family (1 Corinthians 15:28).

It has been said that you cannot create “new wine in old wineskins,” but the more the church establishes a praxis of building inter-generational relationships, the more likely it will be for the emerging generation to embrace and respect the values of the previous generation and to convince the mainstream generation that change is not in and of itself bad.

To restore unity in the black community, the church must create space for the sharing of stories. As salvation history is the lifeline of Christian faith, the church should create forums where youth can record the stories of the elders. Prompted by a few questions, the youth should be expected to share their reflections and experiences after the interviews have been completed. Then, there should be a time when elders listen to the stories of youth and young adults in all of the forms in which the emergent generation may offer them. Since today’s generation of youth and young adults are more conversant with technology, the church must be receptive to the idea of using new methods to communicate with one another. Church elders can learn from youth how to use technology to expand their understanding of theology.

I work as a Chaplain at a senior day center, and we have teenage volunteers who teach elders how to maximize the use of their cellphones and understand the many features that exist that will allow them to communicate with friends and family through the Internet. This activity has allowed us to launch into an even larger enterprise of allowing youth to interview seniors who grew up in the South during segregation and migrated North. These encounters have fostered a greater respect and appreciation by each for the lives of the other generation.

3. We must recommit to education.

Before the 1900s, and even today in a limited way through denominationally and church-supported black colleges, the Black Church has played an instrumental role in ensuring the

literacy of the black community. Now, in most urban cities, such as Philadelphia, Chicago, and Detroit, the performance of the public school system is abysmal, and black children often end up suffering the most due to the deficiencies of public education and a lack of parental involvement in schools. This is precisely the type of problem that the Black Church can help lessen.

Every church should see evangelism through the lens of public school reform. If we cannot strengthen the educational lives of our children, we are, in most cases, ending their futures. In 2013, each church must create a School Organizing Ministry that adopts a local elementary school. This ministry should include young adults and older members. My personal experience in the cities of New York and Philadelphia is that school administrators welcome the outside assistance.

The purpose of such a ministry is three-fold. First, it is to assist parents (most of whom are single females) with remedial education and life-development skills so that they can help their children do better in school. Second, it is to help teachers and school administrators teach in environments that are safe, have adequate funding, are clean, and are properly staffed. Third, it is to offer mentoring to kids. In mentoring students, the church should include a “Rite of Passage” component that calls for a ceremony to occur at the church at the end of each academic year. Young parents rearing children today are the most unchurched segment of our community and, usually the most receptive to church intervention if solutions and real help is being offered.

Any church that does not have an outreach ministry that is seeking to bind the broken hearts of fragile families, and place people on a path to freedom, is out of touch and destined to die. I recall years ago doing door knocking for church on a block and hearing many residents say they were unaware that the church was even on the same block on which they lived. If the church today is serious about getting its light to shine it must be willing to steer the ship in a new

direction. It must unearth its history, it must be inter-generational and ensure that it has transforming liturgy, and it must save future generations by ensuring that they receive the best public education possible. This could be the finest or final hour of the Black Church.

Notes

1. Robinson, Eugene. Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America. (New York: Anchor, 2011), 53.
2. Putnam, Robert D. and David E. Campbell. American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 138.
3. Boal, Augusto. Theatre of the Oppressed. (New York Theatre: Communications Group, 1993), 45.