



A SERVICE OF HEALING

(For those suffering emotional distress, grief, divorce, and physical ailments)

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. History

The legacy of African people stolen from the Motherland, dragged through the Middle Passage, massacred by the slave trade, beaten down by slavery, lynchings, families torn apart, and Jim Crow and segregation have had a significant impact on the resilient people of African descent in these United States of America. This chronicle of brokenness brought forth ingenuity as black people in this country found ways to move toward health and healing as they “made a way out of no way.” Learning to turn what was left into something edible, the development of surrogate and extended families, and naming who God was and how God worked in their lives resulted in mechanisms of survival that are powerful.

Just surviving, however, is not enough. Howard Thurman, the great mystic, challenged us that “there is a hunger within” that seeks God. This God is the One that is able to bring wholeness and healing. “Healing is the process of being restored to bodily wholeness, emotional well-being, mental functioning, and spiritual aliveness.”¹ A first step toward healing is naming one’s brokenness. When you name where you are not whole, you can then take steps to address where there is a need for restoration and healing.

African Americans have come quite a distance since slavery, but there is still much work to be done. Today there are health disparities that bring early death to African Americans. We have one of the highest rates of HIV/AIDS, and the leading cause of death for African American women between the ages of 25-44 is AIDS. Little research funding is provided to fight sickle cell anemia and other prevalent diseases in the African American community such as diabetes, heart disease, and obesity. Poverty is pervasive in our urban areas, with resulting poor health, unemployment, underemployment and addictions still ravaging our communities.

The Role of the Church: Old Testament theology held that if one was ill or not doing well, that this was divine punishment from God for wrongdoing. The crime that African Americans perpetrated in the eyes of white supremacist America was mere existence. African Americans were not seen as full human beings. The vestiges of racism continuously present a need for healing in our community. In the midst of a racist society, the black church has perpetually been a community of healing. Even in the midst of worship today, one’s broken heart, broken spirit, or broken body can be addressed in the songs, prayers, and worship of the black church. African Americans have learned to pray in faith for their bodies and their minds, their relationships and their grief in the midst of an oppressive society.

Ministries have been developed in the black church to address spiritual nourishment, medical care, housing, food, shelter, social service assistance, adoption assistance, job training and placement, clothing, counseling, financial assistance and rental assistance. Many churches include ministries to people infected and affected by AIDS, as well as recovery ministries, drug treatment ministries and many other modalities for the healing of people.

II. Songs that Speak to the Moment

I Will Trust in the Lord

I will trust in the Lord,
I will trust in the Lord,
I will trust in the Lord
‘Til I die.

I will trust in the Lord
I will trust in the Lord
I will trust in the Lord
‘Til I die.

I’m gonna stay on bended knee,
I’m gonna stay on bended knee

I'm gonna stay on bended knee
'Til I die.

I'm gonna stay on bended knee,
I'm gonna stay on bended knee,
I'm gonna stay on bended knee,
'Til I die.²

Implied in the aforementioned diverse offering of services for healing through the black church is the inseparable connection between faith and action. The services and ministries of healing and wholeness offered are an active extension of the black Church's faith in God. As a healing community, the black church has always been known for its strong tradition of faith. Another popular song of this tradition exclaims:

We've Come This Far by Faith

We've come this far by faith
leaning on the Lord;
trusting in His Holy Word
He's never failed me yet.
Oh can't turn around,
We've come this far by faith.³

This faith has been placed in the primary healer in the African American community—Jesus Christ. African American people have understood “their Jesus” as a very personal caregiver, as one who cares for them and about them and offers healing for them when no one else seems to care.

Healing for the African American community has not just had to do with physical care, but also the recognition that inner healing and cleansing from within is desired to be right with God, right with others, and right with one's self. Psalm 51:10 addresses this inner cleansing: “Create in me a clean heart O God, and put a new and right spirit within me,” and brings to mind another song that is a cry for healing:

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

Lord I'm not worthy
Of all these blessings
Give me a clean heart
And I'll follow thee.⁴

III. Rituals of Healing Your Church Can Employ

- At the beginning of the year, or during other notable moments during the church year, pebbles or stones can be placed in a basket by church leaders. The placement of each stone is to represent an act of future healing in the community such as doing something regarding affordable housing, working to establish a food co-op, helping persons get counseling for abuse issues, etc. When the act of healing has truly begun in your church, the pebble/stone is placed back in the offering plate as an offering of thanks to God. Individuals should pay attention to how many pebbles their church has placed in the basket over time and to how many pebbles/stones are moved to the offering tray.
- Cleansing prayers can be offered to God and written on pieces of paper on which names are not placed. Persons may choose to ask God to cleanse them of gossip, unbelief, illness, arrogance and so much more. A basket is passed around and the pieces are made part of an offering given to God in acknowledgement that persons still believe that God can heal today.

IV. Cultural Responses of Healing

I am often humbled as I sit each week in a Spirituality Group with men and women who are living with AIDS. For the past fifteen years the members have changed, but the themes of participants remain the same. Some have chaos in their families and are looking for housing--a space where they can have peace of mind--release from emotional distress. Some are grieving over broken relationships with spouses or long time friends where there has been misunderstanding, pain and tears. We have worshiped and remembered together as some from this community have died. We have shared how unexpressed grief wounds the soul. This group has learned to express their grief and disappointment regarding the members of the group that they have memorialized. They have learned that if they do not name their grief and pain, if they do not recognize their distress, their healing will not come, and inner pain will envelope them. An interesting phenomenon has been that over the years many persons in this Spirituality Group have done two things: (1) they have grieved over the response of their families to their need for healing, and (2) many have thanked God for acquiring AIDS.

Family Response: Although there have been a significant number of persons whose families have been supportive and helpful to them as they have struggled with HIV, there are just as many families who have reacted negatively, including church families. Several women shared their stories about contracting AIDS from their spouses who were IV drug users or had outside sexual relationships and have since died. These women felt betrayed and have had to work through the loss of a spouse, loss of peace, loss of health and loss of acceptance. They too have felt stigmatized by friends and family who, in the beginning, did not want to touch them or allow them to use plates and cutlery for meals that other members of the family used. It has taken education on both the family's part and the group member's part, in addition to counseling, to bring healing to relationships controlled by fear and ignorance.

Thanking God for AIDS: This may be difficult to understand. Why would anyone thank God for AIDS? Over the years, some have expressed that they only paid attention to being whole when they were diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. They had not taken care of their bodies or paid attention to engaging in risky behaviors. They did not take care of themselves, and they did not seek God.

When they were diagnosed, they realized that not only did they seek physical healing from AIDS, but they sought inner and outer healing. They agree that it is lamentable that one would not pay attention to health and healing until after they have been diagnosed. However, they also agree that if they had not been diagnosed, they would probably be dead because of their inattention to themselves and healthy ways of living, including seeking an active spiritual life. A number of persons have reconnected with God since being in the Spirituality Group. Some have reconnected with the Church. In the group, they identified what they were looking for in a church—all wanted, at a minimum, a church who will meet people where they are instead of meeting them with judgment.

In February 2006, the Samuel Dewitt Proctor Conference, whose mission is to “strengthen the capacity and network of the African American Faith community and its leaders to address the needs of those it serves,” issued two resolutions, one regarding HIV/AIDS, and the other regarding a Covenant of care at the end of life.⁵

**Covenant of Compassion and Radical Inclusive Love
in the
Face of HIV/AIDS**

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest.” He said to him, “You shall love your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:36, NRSV)

Whereas, Tuesday, February 7, 2005 is designated as National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness and Information Day (NBHAAD);

Whereas, NBHAAD is a national mobilization effort designated to encourage African Americans, across the United States and its territories, to get educated, get envisioned and get tested for HIV/AIDS;

Whereas, NBHAAD falls on the opening day of the Samuel Dewitt Proctor Pastors and Lay Leadership Conference-Feb.7, 2006; “Organizing for Justice:” Reawakening, Reclaiming, and Restoring the Village at the Hyatt Jacksonville Riverfront in Jacksonville. FL;

Whereas, African Americans disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS as the disparity continues to deepen. African Americans represent 12% of the US population, but now account for more than half of all new HIV infections;

Whereas, as a community of disciples of Jesus Christ the church should be a sanctuary, a safe place, a refuge, a shelter for the stigmatized and the excluded;

Whereas, we are called to work towards both the prevention of stigma and the care of the stigmatized;

BE IT, THEREFORE, RESOLVED we covenant with God and one another to support and respond to the HIV/AIDS pandemic here in the US and around the globe sharing Jesus' radical ministry of love and inclusiveness to all our brothers and sisters both infected and affected by:

- Recognizing the humanity in all God's people;
- Building partnerships to tackle ignorance and political corruption that prevent affordable medication to all those in need; and
- Building church communities that are welcoming, supportive and capable of breaking the silence and stigma about HIV and AIDS.

*Signed This 7th Day of February, 2006
Samuel Dewitt Proctor Conference
Jacksonville, Florida*

Rev. Dr. Willie Barrow
Rainbow Push, Chicago

Rev. Dr. Rudolph McKissick, Jr.
Bethel Baptist, Jacksonville, FL

Rev. Dr. Christine Wiley
Covenant Baptist, Washington
DC

Rev. Dr. Robert Franklin
Candler School, Emory
Univ., Atlanta, GA

Rev. Otis Moss
Tabernacle Baptist, Augusta,
GA

Rev. Dr. Dennis Wiley
Covenant Baptist, Washington,
DC

Rev. Dr. Cynthia L. Hale
Ray of Hope Church, Decatur
GA

Rev. Dr. Susan K. Smith
Advent UCC, Columbus,
Ohio

Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright, Jr.
Trinity UCC, Chicago, Il.

Rev. Dr. F. D. Haynes III
Friendship West, Dallas,
Texas

Rev. Dr. J. Alfred Smith
Allen Temple, Oakland, CA

Dr. Iva Carruthers
Gen. Sec. SDPC, Chicago

Rev. Portia Wills Lee
Trinity African Church, Mableton, GA

The second resolution from the 2006 Samuel Dewitt Proctor Conference has to do with changing our attitudes about faith and dying. Some in the African American Community feel they are demonstrating a lack of faith if there is active preparation for a compassionate transition from life to death. Sometimes a loved one will hang onto life because they have not been given either implicit or explicit permission by family members to die. African Americans would be healthier if they recognized that death is a part of the life cycle and they were taught to prepare for it. This preparation would include: making decisions regarding hospitalization, hospice care, organ donation, assisted living, making decisions regarding resuscitation, attempting to achieve meaningful goals, preparing monetarily so as not to burden others upon death, letting go of old hurts, preparing a will, and doing as much legacy-building as possible without expecting

financial remuneration or even appreciation—rather simply doing good because it is good to do so.

The resolution offered by the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference was as follows:

COVENANT OF CARE AT THE END OF LIFE

*For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life...shall be able to
Separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord...*

Romans:8:38-39 (KJV)

WHEREAS, we are the image of God and every life has infinite worth;

WHEREAS, each life has purpose and meaning;

WHEREAS, care at the end of life recognizes the continuing personhood of those who are in transition despite the sorrow the end of life can bring, we hold fast to the assurance of the joy of Jesus;

WHEREAS, persons of African descent have higher death rates and shorter life expectancies than other ethnic groups; and

*Wherefore, seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses...
Heb. 12:1a(KJV)*

BE IT, THEREFORE, RESOLVED, we covenant with one another to support and honor our dying:

- Recognizing our mortality and practicing ministries of presence and action that overcomes the alienation of death which threatens to separate us from body, community and God;
- Advocating for justice and access in healthcare and delivery;
- Modeling the compassionate and caring spirit of Jesus Christ; and
- Challenging our faith communities to foster greater awareness around death and dying and quality end of life care such as hospice and palliative care to address the continuing disparities of health care outcomes for African Americans which have a negative impact on the well-being of our communities.

**Signed this 9th Day of February, 2006
Samuel Dewitt Proctor Conference, Jacksonville, FL**

Rev. Dr. Willie Barrow
Rainbow Push

Rev. Carla Howlett
Nat'l Consor. Women in Min.

Rev. Dr. Richard Payne
Duke Inst., Care of The End of Life

Dr. Iva E. Carruthers
Gen. Sec. SDPC

Rev. Dr. Mary Ivey
Washington, DC

Rev. Antonio Porter
Fountain Baptist, Summit, NJ

Mr. Philip Coleman
VITAS Health Corp.

Rev. Portia Wills Lee
Trinity African, Mableton, GA

Rev. Dr. J. Alfred Smith
Allen Temple, Oakland, CA

Rev. Dr. Robert Franklin
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Rev. Dr. R. McKissick, Jr.
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Rev. Dr. Christine Wiley
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Resources

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- Wimberly, Edward P. and Anne Streaty Wimberly. Liberation and Human Wholeness: The Conversion Experiences of Black People in Slavery and Freedom. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986.

Notes

1. Rodney J. Hunter. The Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990. p.497.
2. "I Will Trust in the Lord." Negro Spiritual. The African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #391
3. "We've Come This Far by Faith." Text and Tune by Albert A. Goodson. The African American Heritage Hymnal. #412
4. "Give Me a Clean Heart." Text and Tune by Margaret Pleasant Douroux. The African American Heritage Hymnal. #461

5. Samuel Dewitt Proctor Conference. Online location: <http://sdpconference.info/site> accessed 21 July 2008.