

The African American Church: An Absent Participant at the Table of Urban Education Reform

by Robert S. Harvey

Historically, the African American church has served as one of the flagship institutions through which the needs and woes of the community are addressed. In the days of past, the purpose of the African American church was to not only function as a beacon of hope for the lost soul seeking grace, but to also serve as an oasis for all issues affecting the community. Anthony B. Pinn writes, “The history of the black church is complex and multilayered, and develops in response to a blending of sociopolitical, economic, cultural, and religious factors...”¹ The African American church once served as all things to all people—a voice crying out in the wilderness that equality, justice, and hope belong to all persons, despite race and socioeconomic status. However, considering the historical relevance of the African American church as an action-oriented, results-demanding institution, its cultural relevance and political influence have not been harnessed contemporarily toward better public education for urban students. Though there are numerous African American congregations that have attempted to bridge the gap between education and the church community with the initiation of private, religious-based education, the larger African American church has not served as a primary institutional instrument to affect radical transformation in the *free* public education system of America.²

Urban public education in American has reached the highest level of moral crisis, most graphically seen in the nation’s most racially segregated black and brown ghettos of African Americans and Latinos. Urban areas, known to many city planners as “no-zones” for their scarcity of banks, grocery markets, and healthcare institutions³ possess the highest levels of low-performing and probation schools.⁴ The constituents of these schools—students, parents, administrators, and teachers—are so jaded to the possibility of equality that they “look instead for only a sufficiency of means—‘adequacy’ is the legal term most often used today—by which to win those practical and finite victories that appear to be within their reach.”⁵ Realizing that settling for “adequacy” in education is a social sin combined with the detrimental reality that many urban parents are so consumed with multiple jobs providing for the basic needs of their children, there is a demand for an institution willing to sacrifice itself, its time, and its resources in order to advocate for urban students. While urban parents who may not have experienced the highest quality in public school themselves may feel inadequate to demand cleaner learning conditions, better-trained teachers, and a curriculum that meets the needs of their children, the African American church and its leadership is uniquely positioned to advocate for these demands.

In response to the Lovett School maintaining its policy of segregation in 1966 following rhetorical rebuke from the Bishop of the Atlanta Episcopal Diocese, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. asserted: “This is another example of the fact that the Church can be, if it is not careful, the tail-light instead of the headlight in our society.”⁶ As a result, the question begs to be asked—what will the African American church do to reclaim its sociopolitical role in transforming America’s deteriorating public education system for urban students? Will the African American church be the tail-light or the headlight in this journey of education reform?

Despite all the legal changes that have taken place since the 1950s, the United States remains an educationally segregated nation. While the past 60 years have consisted of numerous policies and programs, including external accountability mechanisms,⁷ high-stakes testing,⁸ and centralized school financing, the attention of African American church leaders needs to address the fact that urban public schools in America are inextricably interconnected to the economic and social forces present within urbanism. Undoubtedly, urban public education has been and continues to be “systemically plagued by underfunding, inadequate facilities and staff, unqualified teachers, disruptive (and often dangerous) neighborhood surroundings, racial isolation, and persistent concentration of poverty,”⁹ which furthers social inequality. Theoretically, this concept is known as social reproduction, which is a social theory that posits that race and class stratification are reproduced from one generation to the next, oftentimes with schools at the core of this urban stratification reproduction process.

It is a known reality that the church as an institution functions as one of the most important elements in the life of the [African] American legacy, and the church pulpit has always functioned as a platform for sociopolitical power. Cornel West called the contemporary African American church “one of the few institutions within a shattered Black civil society that could attempt to project some kind of hope and some kind of meaning” in the face of present and more pervasive “walking nihilism.”¹⁰ In many ways, urban stratification in America, particularly the stratification of the public school system, is as much a theological complexity as it is a sociopolitical complexity. That is to say, in 1954 when America experienced one of the most significant social, cultural, and educational legal decisions in the history of the country, *Brown v. Board of Education*,¹¹ it was a theological testament that all persons are created equal in the eyes of God, have the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and are deserving of an equal educational process. Despite the variability in response based on race, religion, and region, the supporters of the 1954 decision communally opined—“God is on our side”¹²—the side of equality for all.

American writer Ernest Hemingway once penned, “Never mistake motion for action.” In the same essence, the African American church must never mistake the Sunday morning motions of preaching and singing as the sociopolitical instruments needed to create effective reform for the urban public school students of America. Preaching motivates the soul and singing enlivens the emotion, yet motivation and enlivening are not enough for dropout rates to be diminished, for test scores to be the equivalent of their white counterparts, for high school graduation rates to rise, or for the attainment of affordable college tuition—all parts of the urban education crisis. The supporters of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision recognized the truth in Hemingway’s words—the motion of expressing a need for reformation cannot be confused with the action of demanding reformation. Can it be said of the 21st century African American church that we too cognize this distinction?

This explicit distinction of motion versus action at the table of urban education reform needs to be addressed in African American churches.¹³ We have mastered motions, yet we have struggled to catechize actions. Some of these actions include: 1) providing forums for candidates to present their urban education platforms, 2) voting for candidates who support urban education reform, 3) actively participating in school board campaigns of favorable candidates, 4) demanding accountability for student progress that is equal across the board, and 5) running parishioners of

our own congregations who understand the complexities of black and brown students for school board office. African American church leaders should always have an ear to the ground, listening to the rumblings occurring daily in urban public schools. African American church leaders should present the educational needs of all students, whether in one's community or not, advocating that an opportunity for an equal education extends beyond the boundaries of the local church's community. The deplorable reality of America's urban education system should enable the African American church to stand firm on the theology that God is on the side "of liberty and justice for all,"¹⁴ which in turn places God against urban education stratification. In order for the African American church to transcend its own egoistic interests in the era of the "all about me" gospel, it requires a dedication to the clarion call of Jesus, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me" (Mark 8:34).

The radical transformation of reproductive urban stratification latent in American public education requires that the African American church forsake itself, take up the cross of action, and follow the guidance of Jesus, a paradigmatic figure of liberty and justice for all. From after-school literacy program to summer schools, computer classes to family science activities, African American churches must reinvigorate and renew their historic commitment to urban public education. African American church leadership must be willing to stand in pulpits all across America preaching a gospel of education reform, equal access to resources, and hope to the community's underclass children and their parents. Though the current trend is to shift the onus of responsibility to school boards and politicians, in order to address the urban education crisis existent within America's urban communities, the African American church must look in the proverbial mirror and ask ourselves if we have taken up our own cross in repairing the breach of educational injustice.

Notes

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