



CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. History

Christian Education Sunday is a time when the congregation turns its attention to remember and, if necessary, rekindle in itself belief in the critical importance of education in the African American Christian tradition. For African American people, education cannot be taken for granted. Christian education, and all education in the Black Church tradition, has its roots in North American enslavement of African peoples.

The signing of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863 ended chattel slavery, but it did not reinstate the dignity and identity of those who had been enslaved. During slavery, reading of any kind was forbidden by law. Enslaved men, women and children were brutally punished with the gouging out of eyes, deafening of ears, removal of fingers or limbs, or brutal beatings with bull whips if it was discovered that he/she knew how to read. Similar punishment was heaped upon those who dared attempt to teach an enslaved person.

Along with disallowing enslaved persons to be educated, were the strict rules against persons speaking in their original languages or practicing the religion of their homeland. Consequently, enslaved persons were not allowed to read the Bible nor were they allowed to interpret the gospel as they desired when they heard or experienced it. Slavery took a toll on the minds, bodies and spirits of our people – yet we survived.

Emerging from a history of enslavement and strengthened by a gospel of salvation, liberation and healing, the African American church sees education as a celebration of freedom. It also has a steadfast understanding that education helps bring healing to the generational cruelty and

dehumanization wrought by slavery. The educational mission of the Black Church is to teach life lessons for survival and, of equal importance, to teach against the mis-education which was fostered during slavery and Jim/Jane Crow era. Carter G. Woodson, noted African American scholar and author of The Mis-Education of the Negro, coined the term “mis-education.” By this term he is critiquing the white elites and educators who intentionally prohibited African Americans from having the right to formally learn the skills of reading, writing and math, and tried to erase the achievements of African Americans. This mis-education, dehumanization and oppression rendered many to lives of dullness, thoughtlessness, and hopelessness. Education in the African American church strives to re-educate the mis-educated, the lied to, the hoodwinked, and the hopeless. From slavery to Jim/Jane Crow through the civil rights era and now in the Techno-Obama era, the agenda of education is critical for our resistance, resilience, and faithfulness.

II. Twenty-First Century Christian Education

(a) Principals, Statutes, Ordinances, Decrees, Commandments

The passages in Psalms and Ephesians declare that Christians must have knowledge of our religious principals, statutes, ordinances, decrees, and commandments. Knowledge and understanding of Christian principals and decrees are important to the Christian journey as they speak to the long-established traditions which have formed our beliefs and upon which we live out our faith. As Christian people, we must study, learn, dialogue about and understand our traditions as well as come to recognize and expect the activity of God. When we teach our principles, statutes, ordinances, decrees and commandments, we are learning what it means to be and become a person of faith, a community of integrity—the body of Christ.

(b) Today’s Christian Education Issues

The Christian tradition is not stale or stagnant. It is not solely about what has happened in the past. It is not enough to memorize principles of old or recite commandments. Christian education helps persons walk in the path of a God who is active in the 21 century. Christians are disciples who are striving each day to be faithful, liberated, and whole. As a determined people, we individually and collectively walk a spiritual path with God. Christian education assists persons with their daily walk with God. Our faith must grapple with contemporary issues, right-now troubles that were not on the socio-cultural radar of our faithful ancestors. Issues such as global warming, HIV/AIDS, abortion, and pedophilia must be part of our Christian education curricula as we grow in faith and come to a deeper understanding of our established principles, statutes and commandments.

God reveals God’s self to every generation as God sees fit. As Christian educators, we must bring to bear our best wisdom and faithfulness to solve the death-dealing dilemmas of our generation with the confidence that God’s revelation is still unfurling. Christian education’s purpose is to assist persons to know God’s way and word – knowing God spoke yesterday, speaks today, and will continue to speak throughout all eternity. Christian education teaches people survival, resilience, faithful living and hope for times such as this.

(c) Teaching the Spiritual Disciplines -- Not Just Facts

Consider also the chiding in Ephesians (1:17-23) for a spirit of wisdom and revelation. Our society does not spend much time or give much credence to wisdom. We want the “facts.” We want mysteries to be solved using science and forensic know-how. Rekindle in your congregation the interior life for the nurturing of wisdom and the expectation of revelation.

Learning to become a community of faith whose people possess a spirit of wisdom and revelation requires that persons take seriously the spiritual practices that strengthen and deepen faith. Consider teaching in on-going ways the spiritual practices of: prayer, meditation, fasting, Sabbath, hospitality, obedience, study, etc.

Pose this question and create a season (month, quarter or year) around it – “How is it with your soul?” Undoubtedly, this significant and meaningful question will spark extended conversations and local church projects. Pastors and teachers should be sure to connect the dots. For instance, if constant answers to this question include concerns about youth, gang violence, teenage pregnancy, consider creating classes on: strengthening men and boys, strengthening women and girls, and strengthening families. If answers to the question center on finances and employment issues, consider classes on poverty, economic empowerment and entrepreneurship. If answers to the question bring forth being able to cope with the maladies of daily life, consider classes or seminars on: racism, sexism, homophobia, AIDS and health issues, sexuality, drug recovery, incarceration, capitalism, and greed.

Who knows, you could end up birthing a health ministry, a prison ministry, a social justice ministry, a family services ministry and so much more.

III. An Exemplar of Christian Education



The late Dr. Grant Shockley is known as the preeminent African American religious educator of the twentieth century. An ordained United Methodist elder, Dr. Shockley was Professor of Christian Education at the Divinity School of Duke University from 1983 to 1989. Dr. Shockley was president of the Interdenominational Theological Center from 1975 to 1979 and President of Smith College in Little Rock, Arkansas from 1979 to 1983. Dr. Shockley’s work as a Christian educator was lived out as a pastor, professor, seminary president, author, husband and father. His work emphasized the necessity of Black Liberation Theology to be taught to laity in the local church. Dr. Shockley believed and lived out the notion that theological reflection and critical thinking were not exclusively for the church pastor. He believed and taught that knowledge of the Bible and creative thought about God must belong to the people. An excellent resource concerning the life and work of Grant Shockley is [Black Religious Experience: Conversations on Double Consciousness and the Work of Grant Shockley](#) by Charles R. Foster and Fred Smith.

IV. Stories About Education

- Carter G. Woodson, in his book, describes mis-education this way:

If you control a (person's) thinking, you do not have to worry about his (/her) action. When you determine what a (person) shall think, you do not have to concern yourself about what he (/she) will do. If you make a person feel that he (/she) is inferior, you do not have to compel him (/her) to accept an inferior status, for he (/she) will seek it himself (herself). If you make a (person) think that he (/she) is justly an outcast, you do not have to order him (/her) to the back door. He (/she) will go without being told; and if there is no back door, his (/her) very nature will demand one.¹

- Teaching toward a spirit of wisdom and revelation means incorporating many aspects of people's lives into their faith education. Modernly, this includes issues such drug abuse and drug dealing. Many clergy and laity have become acquainted with the Serenity Prayer through twelve step programs that have emerged to assist persons battling drug abuse. While the prayer has many different stories concerning its authorship, and while the story of how it came to be used by Alcoholics Anonymous is vague, its power cannot be denied. This prayer is a Christian education tool:

The Serenity Prayer

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as He did, this sinful world
as it is, not as I would have it;

Trusting that He will make all things right
if I surrender to His Will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with Him forever in the next.

Amen.

- W.E.B. Du Bois, author of The Souls of Black Folks, is considered one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century. Du Bois coined the term “double-consciousness” to describe a life-long dilemma he believed Black people faced. He believed that African Americans always view the world through two very real, but different, lenses. First, they see the world from their own perspectives as members of an oppressed community. This view is from the perspective of the one on the receiving end of the bullwhip, the one protesting, the one boycotting for equal rights, fair housing, and better schools. Second, they equally have the perspective of life from the point of the oppressor who seeks to impose on African Americans his own false understanding of our

status and worth. We view ourselves as the dominant culture views us, that is, as inferior, as worthy only for consumption. Du Bois wrote:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son (/daughter), born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world – a world which yields him (/her) no self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels this twoness, –an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.²

It would make for a rich Christian Education discussion now in the era of the first African American president whether Du Bois' notion of double consciousness is still a major dilemma in the 21st century and if so why?

V. Songs

Music is a powerful teacher and healer for oppressed persons as they struggle to find meaning and solace in their lives. Music can assist persons of faith in grappling with the complexity of living faithfully and help to interpret the contradictions which must be faced on their jobs and in their families.

Be intentional about selecting and teaching a wide variety of songs to sing and music to use in the classroom. Consider using many genres of African American music: spirituals, jazz, blues, rhythm and blues, hymns, folk songs, etc. For example, in a lesson on grace you might use: "Golden" by Jill Scott; "Black Butterfly" by Denise Williams; "Love Supreme" by John Coltrane. If you are teaching a class about the persecution suffered by Christ disciples (which could be perfectly coupled with a lesson on protest and resistance) you might use "Ella's Song" by Bernice Johnson Reagan as sung by Sweet Honey in the Rock or the Negro spiritual "Heav'n Heav'n."

VI. Make Christian Education Memorable and Holistic

Many churches celebrate their church school teachers and Christian education workers in an annual worship service or at least during the teaching hour. In addition to this kind of recognition, consider that the best way for anyone to learn is by doing. We also learn better when our entire body is in action—when we are holistically involved. The writer of Psalm 119, in a first-person passionate voice, asks the Lord to ... teach me, give me understanding, lead me, turn my heart, turn my eyes, and give me life. Accordingly, create learning experiences that will assist men, women and children in deepening and broadening their walk with God in a way that touches their mind, body and spirit. Christian education is not just about memorizing facts and dates, but about having personal and communal experiences of the holy. Of equal value and power to lessons learned in the classroom are those lessons that happen beyond the walls of the

classroom. We must be mindful that worship, committee meetings, pot-lucks, etc., are ripe to become teaching moments and learning opportunities of Christian Education.

Here are a variety of ways to consider teaching to stimulate the body, mind and spirit in and outside of the classroom:

- (a) Invite faculty persons from the local seminary to teach a seminar or workshop;
- (b) Create a book group/club to discuss popular topics. This can be done for youth, young adults, men, seniors, widows and widowers, etc.;
- (c) Study the Bible through drama, dance, the arts, then bring the study into your worship service; experience as drama and dance of the Bible stories rather than simply reading the text;
- (d) Provide school support to young people with tutoring, SAT preparation, and by having them visiting colleges and universities;
- (e) Create travel seminars and visit local, regional and international holy places and shrines;
- (f) Encourage learning about wellness and health with exercise classes, blood pressure screenings, diabetes classes, and seminars on HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, especially for women and the elderly;
- (g) Provide opportunities to learn through service: have classes visit the sick, visit prisons, care for the elderly, protest against a local issue of injustice;
- (h) Create ongoing seminars for the choir about the music they are singing and bring in local composers and professors of music;
- (i) Have pot-lucks with the agenda of telling and retelling the stories of the Bible, the history of your church, and stories of African American religion;
- (j) Have a church retreat to experience the practice of Sabbath (or any of the spiritual practices) in new ways; and
- (k) Create an intergenerational Bible study that is led by an intergenerational leadership team ... the list could go on. Create your own list.

VI. Recommended Books

- Foster, Charles R., Fred Smith, and Grant S. Shockley. Black Religious Experience: Conversations on Double Consciousness and the Work of Grant Shockley. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003.
- Wimberly, Anne Streaty. Soul Stories: African American Christian Education. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005.
- Floyd-Thomas, Stacey M. Black Church Studies: An Introduction. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007.
- Westfield, Nancy Lynne. Being Black, Teaching Black: Politics and Pedagogy in Religious Studies. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. The Souls of Black Folks. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1961.
- Woodson, Carter G. The Mis-Education of the Negro. Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1933.

Notes

1. Woodson, Carter G. The Mis-Education of the Negro. Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1933. pp. 84-85.
2. Du Bois, W.E.B. The Souls of Black Folk. New York, NY: Bantam, 1903. pp. 16-17.