



## **HOMECOMING/FAMILY AND FRIENDS DAY**

### **CULTURAL RESOURCES**

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#### **I. Introduction**

*As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Colossians 3:12-14 NRSV)*

In his words to the church at Colossae, Paul understands a basic truth about human beings that is all too often difficult to admit. It is not an easy thing for people to get along with each other. Families of any kind require nothing less than compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience in order for families of any kind to live together. In his exhortation Paul clearly demonstrates an understanding of family dynamics, whether linked by blood or by the Spirit. Homecoming/Family and Friends Day is a time to both recognize and reaffirm the ties that have been key to the past, present, and future of our people.

## **Take Me Back**

by Andraé Crouch

Take me back. Take me back dear Lord  
To the place where I first received you.  
Take me back. Take me back dear Lord where I  
First believed.

I feel that I'm so far from you Lord  
But still I hear you calling me  
Those simple things that I once knew,  
The memories are drawing me.

I must confess, Lord I've been blessed  
But yet my soul's not satisfied.  
Renew my faith, restore my joy  
then dry my weeping eyes.

I tried so hard  
To make it all alone  
I need your help  
Just to make it home.<sup>1</sup>

An online search for the definition of the word *homecoming* from the Merriam Webster Dictionary defines "homecoming" not only as a "return home" but "the return of a group of people to a place formerly frequented or regarded as home."<sup>2</sup> The secular meaning of the word, whose first known use was in the 14th century, pertains to annual events at colleges or high schools or the return of a soldier from military service.

Assuming a religious context, [wiki.answers.com](http://wiki.answers.com) provides the following definition of homecoming:

It is a time when a person who has chosen to leave the home church for personal reasons, spiritual or relocation gets a chance to come back to the home place where he/she first accepted Christ. At this time they get a chance to become reacquainted with the foundation that they received the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior and also if the Pastor who baptized them is still present they have a chance to visit with him and see some old faces that they may not have seen in some time. They also have a chance to fellowship with old friends and get perhaps a feel of that relationship that drew them to Christ in the beginning. It is also a time that they get to visit and see if any changes have been brought upon the church or what has been going on in the areas if one has relocated out of state.<sup>3</sup>

Key to this definition and the spirit of homecoming is the identity of the church as a "spiritual home" and its congregation as a "family." The notion of the congregation as family was and is a

vital underpinning of the ecclesiology of black churches from their earliest beginnings to this day. Part of the control mechanisms used to deprive our people of the cultural identity they gained from our homeland, was the undermining and replacing of our strong African familial ties and identities with transient ones built around a new identity of Africans as property. When the families of our ancestors were routinely separated for profit, their gatherings at ‘hush harbors’ provided spiritual sustenance and social cohesion. Despite intentions by plantation owners to the contrary, these gatherings were the place where the family of God gathered with the understanding of Jesus as Savior and liberator, sent to earth to affirm and not deprive our individual and collective identity as human beings created equal to all others in God’s sight.

After the Emancipation Proclamation, the church continued to be the place where God’s family came together not only for worship but for empowerment, refuge, and strength to face the institutionalized racism just outside the doors of the sanctuary. W. E. B. Du Bois, in the classic book The Souls of Black Folk, speaks to the church as the center of community:

The Negro church of today is the social center of the Negro life in the United States, and the most characteristic expression of African character. ... Back of this more formal religion, the Church often stands as a real convener of morals, a strengthener of family life, and the final authority of what is Good and Right.<sup>4</sup>

This history was part of my spiritual upbringing that has remained with me to this day, as members of my childhood church (St. Stephen’s Baptist Church in Washington D.C.) served, with my parents’ permission, as spiritual, emotional, and surrogate parents if the need arose. I carry this sense of church as extended family with me as a member of the Riverside church in New York City, where I have been under the care and nurture of ‘mothers’ Vera Smith, Margaret Madden, and the late Catherine Glover.

## **II. Our History of Homecoming**

The tradition of church homecoming appears to have begun in the South and intertwined both the African diaspora and the migration patterns of our people in search of better social and economic opportunities. Disillusioned with the failed promises of the Jim Crow South, African Americans moved North and West. Although a number of our ancestors moved west to Kansas, Oklahoma, the Great Plains, and California, the great migrations to the North captured the imaginations of most of our people as we migrated to urban areas such as New York, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Boston, and Washington, D.C. The first great migration from 1916–1930 saw northward movement with jobs made available with the industrial boom of World War I. This migration changed the African American population distribution from predominantly rural to predominantly urban. By the time of the Second Great Migration northward from 1940–1970, five million African Americans had moved north and west, and forty-seven percent of our people lived outside the South.<sup>5</sup>

Homecoming Day served to welcome our folks who moved northward and elsewhere, back to their ‘church home’ to their physical and spiritual families. This day was a means for families who moved away to tap into their ‘roots’—the people, places, and things of home that provide a

sense of security, strength, and empowerment. This included church, where bonds were renewed and spiritual ties reconnected.

### **III. My Own History of Homecoming**



The above picture is the Little Mount Baptist Church in Blackstone, Virginia. Located on Virginia State Hwy 46, Little Mount was the place where my family worshipped. My parents, Deacons Freeman and Emma Palmer, were both members of Little Mount Baptist Church until they moved our family northward to Washington, D.C. But our family remained true to their physical and spiritual roots, as we visited our grandparents and extended family three hours away on a regular basis.

Homecoming was the third Sunday in July, and I fondly recall traveling to Little Mount in the sixties and early seventies for the weekend. I sat in a pew in my Sunday best in the at-that-time small, non-air-conditioned sanctuary. Before me was the senior choir, which consisted of members from both sides of my family; my paternal grandmother Fannie Ann Palmer, her sister and my great-aunt Lizzie Palmer, whose husband Junious Palmer was the younger brother of my grandfather Richmond Palmer; my paternal aunt Mattie Weaver; my maternal aunt Pinkey Taylor Butterworth; and my maternal great-aunt Mamie Banks.

In the congregation sat my maternal grandparents, James and Elvetia Bridgeforth; my paternal grandfather Richmond Palmer, who was a deacon there; and relatives from both sides of the family from near and far. I distinctly recall one Homecoming service in my childhood when the congregation gasped in amazement when a couple disclosed that they chose to fly down from Buffalo, New York for the service. For those assembled in the sanctuary, including myself, this was something to hear. Homecoming service was joyful and celebratory, with good old time

singing, preaching, lots of hugs with relatives and church members, and followed by a meal outside on the church grounds of fried chicken, ham, sides, and desserts whose savories remain with me to this day. Our family would leave from the church grounds that day full, having enjoyed the blessing of family.

I confess that I do not know what songs are sung at Little Mount Baptist Church on Sundays now. But the following songs, sung at Little Mount in my childhood, conjure memories of Homecoming services past.

### **He's Able to Carry You Through**

(He's able) He's able just to carry you through  
(No matter) No matter what the world may do  
(Try Jesus) Try Jesus 'cause he satisfies  
(He's waiting) He's waiting just to hear your cry  
(Trust Him) Trust Him in everything you do  
(For He) For He will bear the load you  
(I know) He's able, able, able, able  
He's able to carry you through.<sup>6</sup>

### **Sweeping Through the City**

We'll go sweeping through the city  
Where my captain has gone before  
We sit down by the banks of the river  
And I won't be back no more.<sup>7</sup>



Mr. Sullivan & Mrs. Iola Pugh

Songs recorded by the Consolers often filled the sanctuary of Little Mount Baptist Church. The Consolers were a husband and wife duo, the late Sullivan and Iola Pugh, who met and married in Miami, Florida. After singing and traveling together in churches in their area, they began

recording in 1955 with songs that were distinctly ‘down home’ gospel. Classics such as “I’m Waiting for My Child to Come Home,” “They Are Somewhere around God’s Throne,” and “How Long Has It Been Since You’ve Been Home” spoke to the heart of cultural and spiritual issues facing African American families.

A comment on YouTube made upon hearing another Consolers’ popular recording, “May the Work I’ve Done Speak for Me” (which was also a favorite song my mother) says this well:

I remember when this was a hit song on the radio. My eyes are welling up with tears. This was when going to church on Sunday was a real family affair. When I say family I mean everybody: the black race, neighbors, family and friends. Those were the days.<sup>8</sup>

To experience what moved this person to write the above comment, listen to the Consolers sing this song on YouTube: YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euuNvaSezY0>

Listen to other classics by the Consolers on YouTube and images of the ‘old landmark’ (your childhood church) will surely come to mind.

#### **IV. Modern Homecoming/Family and Friends Celebrations**

(A) Today, congregations celebrate Homecoming and/or Family and Friends Day, or both. These special days in the life of the church year often consist of a special service, sometimes celebrated on or near a church’s anniversary. Family and Friends Day is celebrated not only in the South but in Northern churches. The day provides an opportunity for the congregation as a family to worship and reconnect with its past, celebrate its present, and strengthen the saints individually and collectively for the future. It often is an outreach and evangelism opportunity as well.

Family and Friends day may be accompanied by an open house (or ministry fair), a reception or a communal meal, and an afternoon service with a guest pastor. In the case of the latter, church members invite loved ones and friends from near and far to what Payne Memorial A.M.E. Church (Baltimore, MD) in a flyer called a “celebration of family, fellowship, and faith.”

In the following YouTube video of the Family and Friends Service at Countyline Primitive Baptist Church in Milledgeville, Georgia, a speaker welcomes visitors; another, giving the Occasion statement, speaks about the importance of family; and still another evokes our ancestral musical tradition with her rendition of “I’ll Be Crossing Over.”

YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ewql-VjbU6M>

#### **(B) Why Celebrate Homecoming/Family and Friends Day?**

Deitrick Haddon’s update (below) of the old hymn “When We All Get to Heaven” speaks to hope in God not only for the African American family, but for the human family.

Homecoming/Family and Friends Day points to this future, celebrating the God who has been the hope and stay for our families from our earliest days in this country to the present. An

affirmation of our familial and spiritual strength is sorely needed upon consideration of the following statistics:

- In 2010, 32% of African Americans are married compared to 50% of other races; 48% of African Americans report themselves as “never married” compared to 30% of other races
- According to the 2010 Census Bureau report, the average African American family median income was \$32,068 in comparison to \$54,620 for non-Hispanic white families.
- In 2010, the U.S. Census bureau reported that 27.4 percent of African Americans in comparison to 9.9 percent of non-Hispanic whites were living at the poverty level.
- The poverty rate for African American households is more than double for all races, with 41% of single parent African American households living in poverty compared to other races
- In 2007, the US Department of Justice reported that black males were six times more likely to be held in custody when comparing the incarceration rates to the to the American residential population.
- More than half of African Americans rent their homes and pay more than the 30% of income that is the recommended threshold a family should pay for housing costs
- Although the gap has narrowed, the mortality rates for African Americans is still higher than other races because of the lack of access to health care, with black men least likely to live past age 70.<sup>9</sup>

The above statistics from Black Demographics.com affirm the saying “Although we’ve come a long way, we’ve got a long way to go.” Our strength as a people has been rooted in coming together with God as our spiritual source. Homecoming/Family and Friends day upholds the faith that has brought our families through four centuries of systematic oppression and reiterates that it is important—both physically and spiritually—for our families to love, forgive, come together, and move forward as a people to the realization of the heavenly family and our rightful place as equal members in society and before God.

### **When We All Get Together**

by Deitrick Haddon

I saw a day of no division, no competition  
And I saw a time of no envy, fuss and strife  
No denominational walls to keep us from one another  
We had love in our hearts,  
We were all sisters and were all brothers

When we all get together  
What a days it’s gonna be  
When we all see Jesus  
We’re gonna sing and shout the victory

Saw it in a vision, we were glad that we made it in  
No longer separated by the color by our skin

Laughing at all the things that kept us so far apart  
And we praised God together  
The love of God was in our hearts

When we all get together  
What a day it's gonna be  
When we all see Jesus  
We will sing and shout the victory<sup>10</sup>

(C) The Black Family Pledge

The following pledge, written by Maya Angelou, perhaps should be part of any Homecoming/Family and Friends Day celebration:

BECAUSE we have forgotten our ancestors,  
our children no longer give us honor.

BECAUSE we have lost the path our ancestors cleared  
kneeling in perilous undergrowth,  
our children cannot find their way.

BECAUSE we have banished the God of our ancestors,  
our children cannot pray.

BECAUSE the old wails of our ancestors have faded beyond our hearing,  
our children cannot hear us crying.

BECAUSE we have abandoned our wisdom of mothering and fathering,  
our befuddled children give birth to children  
they neither want nor understand.

BECAUSE we have forgotten how to love, the adversary is within our  
gates, and holds us up to the mirror of the world shouting,  
"Regard the loveless"

Therefore we pledge to bind ourselves to one another, to embrace our  
lowliest, to keep company with our loneliest, to educate our illiterate,  
to feed our starving, to clothe our ragged, to do all good things,  
knowing that we are more than keepers of our brothers and sisters.

We ARE our brothers and sisters.

IN HONOR of those who toiled and implored God with golden tongues, and in gratitude to the  
same God who brought us out of hopeless desolation, we make this pledge.<sup>11</sup>

**Amen!**

## **V. Recommended for Homecoming/Family and Friends Day Planning**

- Food is a favorite part of Homecoming/Family and Friends Day. The National Council of Negro Women published The Black Family Reunion Cookbook: Recipes and Memories. This book, perfect for planning a meal after Homecoming/Family and Friends Day, contains recipes of dishes special to the families of the contributors and even a soul food dictionary.
- Dr. Colleen Birchett, PhD has written Family Ties: Restoring Unity in the African American Family. Published in 2006 by Urban Ministries, this book contains vignettes of families in the Bible coupled with modern-day parallels of African American family. Chapters in this book may be used for 90-minute adult teaching sessions, and there is a leader's guide for this book as well.
- Dr. Birchett also wrote How I Got Over (1994), which contains testimonies of African American families, reflections from Psalms and the book of Job, and Bible study applications.
- Sonia Sanchez's poem "Catch the Fire (for Bill Cosby)" is a favorite of mine. It enumerates themes of family, the importance of tradition, and our heritage. It can be read in Cornell West's book Restoring Hope: Conversations on the Future of Black America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), but an MP3 of Sonia Sanchez from her recording *Full Moon of Sonia* (2004) is well worth the .89 cost. To listen to a sample or purchase the MP3, go to <http://www.amazon.com/Catch-Fire-Bill-Cosby/dp/B000QVVZN4>
- As part of its series "Faith and Family America," The Public Broadcasting Service focused on African American families. Interviewees included Dr. Wallace Charles Smith, pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church in Washington D.C., and excerpts from a sermon on families by Rev. Darrell Armstrong, pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church in Trenton, New Jersey. To watch this episode or read its text, go to <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week911/special.html#>

### **Online Articles and Websites**

- The Black Religious Crisis. Online location: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1610> (accessed 19 March 2012).
- Taking Care of Business: The Black Family and the Black Church. Online location: <http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/~hfairchi/pdf/FairchildArticles/TakingCareofBusinessFamilyChurch.pdf> (accessed 19 March 2012).

- Franklin, Robert F. “Can the Church Save Black Families?” Emory University Center for the Study of Law and Religion. Online location: [http://cslr.law.emory.edu/fileadmin/media/PDFs/Op-Ed\\_Pieces/Franklin.Can\\_the\\_Church\\_Save\\_African\\_American\\_Families.pdf](http://cslr.law.emory.edu/fileadmin/media/PDFs/Op-Ed_Pieces/Franklin.Can_the_Church_Save_African_American_Families.pdf) (accessed 19 March 2012).
- The National Black Church Family Council. Online location: <http://www.nbcfamilycouncil.com> (accessed 19 March 2012)
- Ableman, Robert, “A Comparison of Black and White Families as Displayed on Religious and Secular Television Programs,” *Journal of Black Studies*, September 1989, vol. 20, no. 1, 60–79. Online location: <http://jbs.sagepub.com/content/20/1/60.extract>
- “Black History Lesson: Family–Church.” *The Columbus Dispatch*, February 5, 2010. Online location: [http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/faith\\_and\\_values/2010/02/05/fv\\_blackhistory](http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/faith_and_values/2010/02/05/fv_blackhistory). (accessed 19 March 2012).

### **Audio and Videos**

- Slavery by Another Name: Great Migration Factors. Online location: <http://www.nbcfamilycouncil.com/> (accessed 12 March 2012).
- Black Family Pledge by Dr. Maya Angelou, recited by Jailyn Gabrielle. Online location: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4pMoajM4\\_U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4pMoajM4_U) (accessed 12 March 2012).
- Our Families: LGBT African American Stories. Online location: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1AYIxGM\\_2g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1AYIxGM_2g) (accessed 12 March 2012).

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### NOTES

1. “Take Me Back.” By Andraé Crouch. Andraé Crouch and the Disciples, Take Me Back. Nashville, TN: Light Records, 1974.

2. Online location: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/homecoming>

3. Online location: [http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What\\_is\\_the\\_purpose\\_of\\_homecoming\\_at\\_church](http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_is_the_purpose_of_homecoming_at_church)

4. Du Bois, W. E. B. The Souls of Black Folk. New York: The New American Library Inc., 1969. p. 214.

5. “In Motion: The African American Migration Experience.” The Schomburg Center for Research and Culture. Online location: <http://www.inmotionaame.org/home.cfm>

6. “He’s Able to Carry You Through.” Online location: <http://cyak.org/uploads/2/0/8/42084260/songbook.pdf>

7. “Sweeping Through the City.” Online location: <http://www.lyric.com/lyrics/shirley-caesar/82190-sweeping-through-the-city/>

8. “May the Work I’ve Done Speak for Me.” Online location: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euuNvaSezY0>

9. “African American Population.” Online location: <http://www.blackdemographics.com>

10. “When We All Get Together.” By Deitrick Haddon. Voices of Unity featuring Deitrick Haddon. Supernatural. Indianapolis, IN: Tyscot Records, 2001.

11. Angelou, Maya. “The Black Family Pledge.” Online location: <http://www.math.buffalo.edu/~sww/angelou/poems-ma.html#bfp>