



Ways Pastors Can Dialogue with Churches about Homosexuality

By Josef Sorett

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According to popular reports, sexuality is a taboo topic in African American churches. The black church has been described as simultaneously one of the most homophobic and homo-accepting institutions. In recent years there have been numerous media stories that have centered around the intersections of black churches and sexuality, in general, and homosexuality, in particular. On one hand, black churches have figured centrally as the foil in discussions of the push for social equality on the part of LGBT persons in American society, as well as within Christian churches (i.e. same-sex marriage, “don’t ask, don’t tell”). On the other hand, there have been sensational accounts of sex scandals (i.e. no need to name names) in which African American preachers have been the main protagonists. In the former, black churches are typically cast as hyper-homophobic even as they are part of the larger culture of American evangelicalism that, as a rule, continues to unofficially elevate homosexuality as an ultimate “sin.” As for the latter, whether alleged or confirmed, the coverage and appeal of these stories taps into centuries-old tropes of black sexuality—both gay and straight—as defined by deviance.

There is, of course, much complexity obscured by these two trajectories. Still, given their prevalence, perhaps it is unsurprising that black churches would adopt a posture of silence on matters of sexuality. Caught between a rock (i.e. the scapegoat) and a hard place (i.e. the shame), who wouldn’t attempt to opt out of the public conversation? What W.E.B. Du Bois stated in a 1926 speech to the NAACP largely remains true, “We are ashamed of sex and we lower our eyes when people talk of it... Our worst side has been so shamelessly emphasized that we are denying we have or ever had a worst side.”

Yet even if silence and indifference (or opposition) appear to be the default position, African American congregations are anything but silent on such matters. Almost three years ago I had the opportunity to speak with more than one hundred African American Christians—clergy and lay people—from across the country. In small groups of about ten to fifteen, these conversations

captured the diversity and dynamism (i.e. class, denomination, age, gender, physical location, etc.) that is black churches. Yet they all shared at least two common qualities: they lasted beyond the time allotted and they ended with requests for follow-up dialogues. If nothing else, black church-goers want for a constructive conversation about sexuality that moves beyond rumor mills and media sound-bites. Moreover, without fail, the preachers I spoke with insisted that church ought to be a space that such dialogues can take place.

Increasingly, black religious leaders are recognizing the urgency of a more open, honest, and helpful conversation about sexuality (including homosexuality) within their churches. Rev. Dr. Calvin Butts' Op-Ed in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* in October 2010 in response to the Bishop Eddie Long affair immediately comes to mind. In his essay, Rev. Butts pointed to HIV/AIDS as a motivating rationale for his call. In doing so, he helpfully highlighted how a conversation about sexuality has implications beyond theological, congregational or cultural politics. We need not another reminder (or perhaps we do) that the fastest growing population of new HIV cases are black women, a group long considered the core constituency of black churches. However, one still has to wonder about a discourse that shifts so easily from scandal and shame to STDs. What Rev. Butts' timely essay reveals, more broadly, is that the posture of black churches toward sexuality has largely been that of reaction.

The question, then, is whether black churches want to perpetuate an inherited discussion—what Du Bois described as “second-hand soul clothes”—of sexuality defined by deviance and/or disease. Even if the AIDS pandemic (or a specific scandal) forces a discussion of sex, is it possible for churches to proactively push past this pathology lens? Even more, is it plausible that Christians, black and white, might re-imagine a conversation about sexuality on positive terms? What would it mean for black churches to take ownership over the terms on which this conversation takes place; or least the terms of their participation.

By no means am I attempting to conflate pillow-talk with gospel-preaching. But I'd wager (forgive me!) that most readers of the African American Lectionary would agree that black churches could stand to develop a language around sexuality that more helpfully addresses the experiences, expectations and actions of those who occupy its pulpits and pews. To this end, what follows are just a few preliminary thoughts—by way of several familiar challenges to the conversation—to consider as we seek to develop that deeper dialogue.

“But the Bible says...”: Many believe that there is no way to get around perceived biblical injunctions against homosexuality. Maybe we are unwilling to acknowledge the inescapable act of interpretation or to own the biases behind our selective privileging/ignoring of certain texts. Yet perhaps we can re-frame discussions of texts on sex and sexuality in the Bible as passages worthy of and strong enough for substantive questioning, rather than transparent and irrefutable proclamations. Haven't we done this type of thing before for passages on slavery and gender? Conversations with laypersons reveal that this Socratic kind of “everyday” hermeneutic is already common.

“I'm not a sexuality-expert”: While the Bible is an area of presumed expertise for preachers, many pastors may not feel they have adequate training to teach or preach on sexuality, in general, or homosexuality, in particular. This may, in fact, be a fair assessment. If so, then why

not consider inviting someone who is trained to do so? I know too many people who are well-qualified to teach on this topic, who maintain a deep respect and commitment to black churches, and who would love to help lead such a dialogue. You can also e-mail the Lectionary and they will provide you a list too.

“Sermons and sexuality don’t mix”: Although there are a few pastors who feel qualified (or comfortable enough) to preach on sexuality, there are others who believe that sermons and sex talk should never mix—period. The pulpit, in many ways, is a place to start conversations; a space to break fallow ground. Perhaps, then, the deep dialogue needed for difficult topics also requires the space offered in smaller groups. My own research suggests that for each pastor who won’t ever preach on sexuality, there are plenty of Sunday school teachers who are already taking it on. Maybe discussions can begin in a Bible Study or a leader’s gathering. There is a forum that will work.

“Protect the right to sin?”: For many reasons—some more legitimate than others—many African Americans respond with hostility to recent efforts to link the struggle for LGBT civil rights to the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and ‘60s. Even if black churches hold fast to a conviction that homosexuality is a sin, since when has sin disqualified one from equal rights and protection under the law? To the extent that the legal rights of citizens supersede sin, would it be a sin for black preachers, at least those who claim to stand in the prophetic tradition, to take a public position against hate speech against gays and lesbians? Never mind supporting same-sex marriage, and the range of legal protections it provides to many African Americans.

To be clear, creating a critical yet constructive conversation about sexuality and religion is not a challenge posed to black churches alone. This is a much bigger public predicament. Even in the university setting, many assume spirituality and sexuality to be mutually exclusive subjects. Such a goal, then, requires hard work for good reason; it is light lifting by no measure. Still, I take hope in things big and small. An op-ed from an influential pastor. Conversations with colleagues. Enthusiasm on the ground by local church-folk. An on-line dialogue sponsored by the African American Lectionary project. This is indeed a moment of possibility. Let the next stage of the conversation begin.