

“Heart and Head” in Reaching Pastors of Black Churches

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Educated Clergy and the Black Church

“The tradition for which the Sunday service is noted is its preaching. In spite of racism, white people have often recognized the special talent evident in the preaching of black churches. Within black congregations, bad preaching is the unforgivable sin.”

The above statement, made by sociologist and preacher Cheryl Gilkes (2001:129), has been echoed by many other scholars of the Black Church. Larry Mamiya (2006:35) describes the sermon similarly as “the highlight of a black worship service, and black clergy are often judged by their preaching ability.” But what kind of preaching is considered superior? What kind of preaching is unforgivably poor?

One of the growing number of seminary-educated clergy spokesperson calling for a change toward more head-educated black clergy to bridge what he terms “generational churching” is Sherard Burns - preacher, church planter, lecturer and co-founder of the Black Alliance for Reformed Theology (BART). In an on-line paper entitled “[The Need for an Educated Black Clergy](#)” Burns writes:

If pastors within the African-American church are going to effectively lead and shepherd the flock of God into the 21st century, these men would do well to be educated...with the changing tides of society and the enormous gap that separates “generational churching” ... or the ways in which the Black church has worshipped or “had church” over the years. While we must give respect to our history, we are challenged to consider that the way we used to “do church” a generation ago may not be the way to do it today. This is increasingly apparent as we witness the overall rise in education among African-Americans...with this increase in education comes an increase in expectation...In other words, shall we expect some measure of intellectual competency from our doctors, lawyers, and politicians (occasionally) but excuse the minister from his academic responsibility? God forbid.

More black clergy have masters’ degrees now than a generation back. At the same time, black clergy are still less than half as likely to have a master degree than white clergy, according to a recent report by Larry Mamiya (2006). There are fewest black clergy with seminary graduate degrees in the South. This problem is becoming particularly acute for black churches because of what Mamiya terms “reverse migration” of educated blacks moving back to take professional and managerial positions there. This increases the probability that many in the congregation will be far more educated than their pastor. An educated clergy, a Mamiya explains, is not only better able to preach to an educated membership, but is also better able to work with community organizations and resources, and has the competence to be effective in church administration and pastoral counseling.. As Mamiya concludes from his research: “For black churches and denominations, the

education of clergy is one of the most significant factors for ministry in the 21st century.”

Prognosis for the next decade

Senior pastors of predominantly African American congregations in the mainline Presbyterian and United Methodist church typically have graduate degrees. Yet, as Mamiya (2006) reports of the historic black denominations only AME has made the M.Div. a requirement for pastors, and that quite recently. Many pastors of the National Baptist and independent Baptists African-American congregations do not have education past college, if that, in part because each congregation can independently not only choose but ordain its own pastor. The great cluster of denominations and churches making up what Cheryl Gilkes (2001) refers to as “the Sanctified Church”, which include the large COGIC denomination and the many Holiness and Pentecostal church clusters and individual congregations, similarly require neither graduate education for their pastors nor college.

Sociologists and others often refer to the Black Church, although they recognize there are many differences among predominantly black member congregations, just as there are among predominantly white member congregations. At the same time (to paraphrase Mamiya 2006, ftn #2) black congregations in responding to a shared history and current societal pressures have developed a common “black” church culture, revealed in comparable styles of worship and preaching.

Although the numbers of black megachurches are increasing (Mamiya 2006, Watts 2006), most of the black churches like most predominantly white churches are small to medium-sized congregations. In urban areas since the early twentieth century,, storefront churches have served as centers of worship, community centers for members, and centers providing leadership opportunities for those without other such access (Jones, 1991). Currently, there are many storefront and mobile churches (without a permanent chapel) of between ten and fifty members clustered in urban areas, not only in the South, but also in the D.C.-Maryland corridor, in New York City and environs, and in the Northeast. Omar McRoberts (2003) described the many black storefront congregations clustered within a short distance of one another at “Four Corners” in Boston, all of which served as such centers but only for their particular members and leaders. Few storefront churches have full time paid clergy, and are unlikely to attract seminary-educated pastors.

Getting Educational Resources to Black Preachers

Developing and disseminating courses and educational resources to the soon-to-be or already ordained many black pastors without seminary or often college degrees is a recent program concern of publishing houses, of seminaries, and of foundations (particularly Lilly, Ford, and Pew), as well as megachurches. Black megachurches are running their own Bible institutes, not just for educating laity, but also for all the beginning and sometimes all or “terminal training” of black clergy (Mamiya 2006:12). Seminaries have also offered undergraduate level certificate programs to those in or headed for ministry in the Black Church congregations, often with opportunity for students to get college credit for courses taken.

There are reality blocks to making use of these educational resources. Many African American and Caribbean persons called to preach cannot afford the time and costs involved for theological

education, even with the organizational supports named above. A likely majority are working full time in secular jobs, caring for families, and spending most of their remaining waking hours in congregational worship and ministries.

Another block is attitudinal or cultural. There are seemingly a substantial number of black persons in ministry who feel that a particular educational resource is nothing they need or want as ordained leaders. This can be because the particular resource, though of perhaps help to white clergy and congregations, is not viewed as effective for pastoring churches within the Black Church tradition. Almost any educational resource would be perceived as superfluous for preaching, if pastors feel that to preach well, as one put it, "All I need is Jesus."

There is a current division with the Black Church as a whole on the importance in preaching of reaching the heart as compared to engaging and informing the head. Compared to predominantly white congregations and denominations, the Black Church is known for more member participation in the sermons affirming the preacher, more emotion filled music and prayer services, with clapping, standing, and sometimes "shouting" (dancing, spinning, as well as verbalizing). At the same time the amount of emotion that should be expressed in church services by its leaders and members is a source of "active contention with many African American congregations" as summed by Nelson (2005:207). The possibility is recognized by several Black leaders that in acquiring advanced theological education, some black clergy may preach in ways that are so emotionally un-involving to their members, they become ineffective preachers. In his address posted on the Lilly website entitled "Prophetic Ministry: The Black Church and Theological Education" (Resources in Christianity, p.8) Bishop William DeVeaux expressed this concern: "*As you get the learning, do not lose the burning.*"

I decided to explore the heart-head connection and dichotomy in connection with education for ministry by talking with a sample of students and graduates of Hartford Seminary's Black Ministries Certificate Program, of those who had filled out a survey on this program a month or so earlier.

BLACK MINISTRIES PROGRAM, Hartford Seminary

Since its inception in 1982, the BMP has given certifications to nearly 1,000 men and women. A college degree is not required to enter. Currently, this is a two-year program and most courses are held on Saturday mornings throughout the academic year. The program offers courses in liturgy, Hebrew scriptures, New Testament, Christian education, Church administration, counseling, preaching, ethics, theology and writing, as well as charismatic praise and worship. Students may elect to have their courses graded for college credit, credits transferable if desired to a local two-year college.

Each year the student body (40-60 students) is diverse in terms of age, denomination, ordained status, and educational attainment. Within the last decade or so, an estimate made is that of those who enter without any college credits, over a fourth have gone on to get at least a junior college degree if not a bachelors degree. The Seminary has an M.A. program, but not an M.Div. Usually of each entering cohort at least one or two students have gone on to earn M.A. at Hartford Seminary, and sometimes an M.Div. degree from another seminary.

Students and Graduates of BMP

In spring 2006, the current Director of the Black Ministries Program, the Rev. Dr. Benjamin Watts, approved and was part of a group that designed a survey of BMP current students and graduates. The results of this survey indicate that about a three-fifths majority (of the 77 responding) are currently ordained and now have a four-year college degree.

Yet far fewer had a B.A. degree when they entered the program. Within the current first year class (30 responding), students' educational level ranges from one-fifth who had at least a four-year college degree down to one fifth who had no education past high school. Although there are equal numbers of men and women, they range widely in age. The students represent over eight denominations. They are mainly affiliated with congregations of the historic Black Church denominations (AME, AME Zion, CME, Baptist, COGIC, Pentecostal). Some students belong to congregations of the mainline Protestant denominations (PCUSA, UCC, UMC), several are members of independent churches, and there are a few who are unsure of what denomination and/or congregation, they wish to affiliate with eventually. Of current students, 27% are lay leaders, 60% certified to preach, and 13% ordained.

As an estimate, at least half of the entering BMP students hope to use the program for further certification for preaching or for ordination within their churches.

A sample of thirteen BMP participants from those who returned surveys, alumni mainly, agreed to be interviewed in time for this paper. These persons were selected as far as possible to represent age, gender and denominational differences.

The Importance of Heart and Head in Reaching Members of Black Churches

Black persons who come to an educational program in ministry taught in a Seminary are likely those who personally consider that their own learning and study will improve their ministry. Those interviewed were asked what were the characteristics of "good" sermon (in contrast to a "poor sermon"). A good sermon was generally seen as having meaning to those listening, and moves them in positive directions. At the same time, there were some differences expressed about how important theological education is to delivering a good sermon. In response to an interview question on whether they saw good preaching as reaching more the heart or the head, the answers ranged from the heart mainly (2), the head mainly (2), both about equally (7), or sequential priority - either head to heart (1) or heart to head (1).

Believing that reaching the heart is most important was expressed by a few who had been bored or confused by hearing sermons with scholarly or obtuse references, sermons which were so inferior to the more lively, emotional ones they usually enjoyed. Or as one put it, a poor preacher:

"Preaches over people's head, preaching in a dimension they do not understand."

Believing that reaching the head is most important, seems to be expressed mainly by those who have experienced preaching that they feel has no message for the head. This is preaching they see as overly emotional and rhythmic, and often charismatic. As another explained:

"If we were to speak in tongues all the time, we would be speaking in spirit but never to the mind. So the spirit would be edified but the mind would have no knowledge of what is going on."

One believed that in preaching the sermon should go first to the head and then become increasingly emotionally involving to better inspire listeners to action; or in other words: the sermon “*must be transferred from your head to your heart*”.

Another reversed this sequence because;

The heart, the spirit, is definitely where God is speaking. That is where you have to open up people first. But at some point you need to travel to the mind, so there is a mind change. When you preach to the spirit, it should change the mind.

The sharpest dichotomy between heart and head in is made in reference to preaching that is primarily “whooping” compared to that which is more “teaching-preaching.”

Whooping: Reaching the Heart

Several of the BMP participants interviewed used the term “whooping” to describe what they meant by heart-centered preaching solely. A senior pastor of a large black church in Michigan, Levon Yuille (2001), gave the following description of “whooping” to a reporter:

The African-American mode places a lot of importance on preaching. The African-American experience tries to reach for the intellect and the emotion. Teaching is the intellect. In our dichotomy of preaching, in the preaching mode, you are trying to emotionally arouse and also teach. This is acceptable across the board, but us African Americans are accused of too much emotion. We call it whooping. Whooping is when we bring it on home, we elevate the voice and we put a sing-song quality to the way we are talking. It is part of the homiletical technique. I am going to give you an example: “The Lord is good.” Then we really get into it. “THE LORRRRD ISSS GOOOOOOD!!” “Wow! He is whooping today,” parishioners say. And in the experience of the Black church, it has been effective. You don’t depend on that, though. You want to make sure that you laid a good intellectual foundation.

Pastors who engage in “whooping” may also have taken care to lay the intellectual foundation for their sermon, sermon based on biblical exegesis in relating to contemporary concerns. In illustration, Reverend C. L. Franklin (father of Aretha Franklin) is credited with being a superb seminary educated preacher who also used whooping. To quote the book jacket (Franklin 1989), he used “the extemporaneous style of preaching, ‘whooping’ or chanting, combining oratory and intoned poetry to reach both head and heart.”

From interview accounts, it would seem other black pastors whose preaching is predominantly “whooping” do not attempt to reach the head at all. Rather these preachers focus their sermons on making members happy, spiritually awakened and emotionally involved without imparting any message.

Eight of the BMP alumni interviewed brought up the topic of “whooping” as a preaching style. Although several thought whooping could sometimes be used with discretion to reach the hearts of some members, the majority was opposed to any whooping by the preacher. This is mainly because, to quote two, in whooping:

- The preaching is something with no substance; there is a lot of whooping and yelling, but by the time you leave the service, nobody remembers what the preacher preached on.
- A lot of time in the black community we have many preachers that can really get you going, get you hyped, and you be feeling the message. It sounded good at the time; it spoke to the fact that I was feeling sad when I got there, and all that stuff. But you leave there, saying to yourself, “O.K. What was the message? What was really said?” If you really play back in your mind, and listen like I do, and take notes, you realize that a lot of stuff that was said made no sense. Never mind that it was not scripturally sound; it just made no sense whatsoever.

Teaching-Preaching: Reaching the Head

Good teaching-preaching is usually described as firmly bible-based, but which also gives a message the pastor makes meaningful to current times and the lives of those listening. The three most preached on topics in the Black Church as the ITC Faith Factor 2000 Project showed (Mamiya 2006:35) are God’s love and care, personal spiritual growth, and practical advice for daily living – or on changing the world through changing individuals rather than directly on social justice or taking social action. McRoberts (2003) made a similar observation in describing the Boston cluster of black churches at “Four Corners.”

Cheryl Sanders (1986) in an analysis of published sermons preached within the Black Church tradition in five denominations describes the main parts as exegeting and interpretation of scripture (or “expounding the significance of a particular text with an emphasis upon application”), followed by teaching (or “setting forth a structured presentation of information within the sermon”) and then exhorting (or “admonishing the hearer to act or exhibit some virtue”), enlivened variously by testifying or story telling by the preacher.

Good teaching-preaching in the Black Church tradition is not a dry academic exposition. It involves making the text message relevant to the current issues and lives of those listening. In so doing, various biblical texts or different foci within a text, may be better suited to “framing” the “particularistic” experiences of members of one black church than another, to use McRoberts (2003:65-66) preaching analogy. In making the message relevant to those listening, the language and illustrations used are important. In larger Black churches with two or more worship services particularly those attracting different age groups, the expert preacher using the same passages and central message, can almost seem to be preaching two different sermons. This is illustrated in one interviewee’s description of his senior pastor’s preaching:

Because of the blend of cultures at S..., Reverend ...is a lot more involved around the congregation than pastors would be in the old school. He uses contemporary issues in his sermons, so I think he had a better relationship through his preaching with the members there. I have seen him take the same scripture and text in the 8:00 service and do it again at the 11:00, and it is altogether a different presentation... In the 8:00 he presents it from the perspective of what was actually going on spiritually; in the 11:00 he uses a lot more current events, and the illustrations would be different – say, mentioning the kind of music that is popular.

Although Black women may be more inclined to include story telling in their preaching than men (Sanders 1986), both male and female preachers may find they have to include more story telling in

their sermons if their message is to be understood. As a seasoned clergyman interviewed explained:

I have found that more recently 'story telling preaching' has become more popular. This is primarily because there are less people that are bible literate. When you say 'the story of Lot and his daughters' – they do not know what you are talking about. So you have to explain, sometimes in more detail than normal.

The Importance of Study and Learning in Preaching

Teaching-preaching is done by Black Church pastors with seminary degrees as well as by those with no higher education, but who simply read the Bible on their own. In the latter case, the pastor feels that if needed, God will inspire him or her to understand the basic message of the text to be preached.

I asked those interviewed a version of the following: "Sometimes pastors think they do not need any education for preaching, it is just Spirit-led. What would be your response?"

Almost all interviewed attest to the importance of education, but to varying degrees. About half believed academic study is almost essential to being a good preacher and a good pastor, and the remaining half considered theological education as certainly helpful and important in good preaching, though perhaps not indispensable. Almost all would attest to the centrality of the Spirit in good preaching. At the same time, understanding what God means to say, takes some careful study: As a woman lay leader explained:

The elements of good preaching to me are first to hear from God what He wants you to preach and prepare. You have to be aware that you are not preaching for you, you are preaching for the congregation. Some people will take scripture out of context, and it is not really what God meant. I think it is important to understand that ... So you have to be cognizant of the whole experience; what God wants you to say, not what you want to hear, not what you think people want to hear, but what God wants you to tell them... and make it relevant to the 21st century.

At the same time, careful study does not necessarily mean that seminary education is essential for good preaching. To quote another lay woman leader.

I don't think everyone needs to be a theologian. A poor preacher is one who is too complex to reach all the audience... I don't think some pastors need formal education for preaching. I think it is a gift. Everybody should get something out of it.

But what if the pastor's interpretation of the text differs from what more biblically educated members understand it to mean? This potential conflict recalls the exhortations referred to earlier by several that black clergy need to be better educated to pastor effectively to the increasing number of well-educated black persons. As noted, this is thought to be a particularly pressing problem in the South, where the majority of black pastors are not college educated and to where increasing numbers of black persons are migrating to take professional and executive positions.

One pastor, also working full-time as a professional in a state agency, describes this exact problem for relations between pastor and a lay leader of the congregation:

At my father's church the pastor was is not very well read, and not very well formally educated. I don't even think he has high school education. It creates problems in the pastor's interpretation of the scriptures. My dad feels he understands and knows scriptures' meaning (often better than does the pastor). When the pastor does not seem to be able to give the scripture a spiritual basis, does not illustrate and explain it thoroughly to my father's satisfaction - that creates a problem. Then the pastor is stressed because my dad with his masters and specialty degrees asks questions sometimes that he really cannot answer. So the pastor is stressed by my dad; and my dad feels the pastor is really not being a good leader. So some of the old traditional southern ministers are more likely to say you really don't need a formal education. There was a time when that would get by; and that would be satisfactory to some in the congregation who did not have it either. I really think it creates consternation between the membership – when you have that line of division between the minister and some people in the congregation who may be more educated.

Although graduate degrees are perhaps not essential for pastors, most interviewed would agree that the Spirit could make better use of educated preachers.

I don't think pastors necessarily have to have education to preach the Word of God; but it certainly helps their skills in communication and transference of knowledge if you have preachers who are educated.

This position is more strongly advocated by following BMP ordained alumni interviewed, who also is an executive in a firm:

A pastor, who tries to do the job without more formal training, is short-changing God in my opinion. There are too many ministers misleading people because they do not understand the Word, do not have the context, and do not have a good grasp of what the Bible is and how it ought to be used. I do not want to approach ministry any differently than I approach private business. ...I deal with the attorneys in the major law firms in the State of Connecticut. Most would refer business to me...because of the level of expertise that I try to demonstrate in my daily work with clients. Well, why should I give God less than that?

“Preaching to members in your church,” survey results indicate, is one of the most important outcomes of the Black Ministries Program. Four-fourths of current students and BMP graduates assess what they learned about preaching as of at least much value to their ministries (over half of “great value”).

The relative importance in reliance on the heart and/or head, spirit and/or education in preaching, is likely summed up well for many in the Black Ministries Program by one man working very full-time in a blue collar occupation, who is amazing but not unique among those who come to this program. He recently got his license to preach from his church, and is now continuing study for his BMP Certificate at Hartford Seminary, and is looking further to getting a college degree and becoming ordained.

I think education is very important. You got to be educated just to be able to follow what the Spirit is telling you. If you don't get education in preaching today, you are preaching to the lost. You lost and they are lost.

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