



Raymond R. Sommerville Jr.*

**“LIFT UP YOUR VOICE LIKE A TRUMPET!”
MOBILIZING AFRICAN-AMERICAN
CHURCHES TO RESPOND TO THE
HIV/AIDS PANDEMIC**

“Shout out, do not hold back!
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.”
(Isaiah 58: 1-2 NRSV)

The Legacy of Prophetic Black Clergy and Churches

Even prior to their formal organization in the nineteenth century, Black religious leaders and communities in “invisible institutions,” served as prophetic voices and advocates for liberation and justice. Motivated by visions of freedom and biblical exemplars, prophetic preachers like Nat Turner and Gabriel Prosser in Virginia, and Denmark Vesey in South Carolina, plotted and executed slave uprisings that threatened the foundations of the slavocracy. Inspired by the liberating Spirit of God, prophetic Black abolitionists like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass lifted their portending voices like trumpets to proclaim deliverance to the captives.

In the same century, freed Blacks in both the South and North, under the prophetic leadership of pioneering founders like Richard Allen (AME Church), Nathaniel Paul (Baptist), James Varick (AME Zion Church), Andrew Bryan (Baptist), Peter Spencer (Union), and many others, organized the first

*Raymond R. Sommerville Jr. is associate professor, History of Global Christianity, Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Indiana.

institutional churches for Black people. Expressly born out of social and ecclesiastical protest of white racism and religious discrimination, these churches and denominations served as all-comprehensive institutions for oppressed African-American communities, providing spiritual, social, moral, economic, cultural, and political uplift. The pioneering churches they founded during the enslavement era laid the foundation for the rebuilding of families and the subsequent creation of independent political, social, educational, and business institutions after emancipation.

But even with the eclipse of Black freedom during the rise of Jim Crow segregation and violence in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a vanguard of progressive and prophetic leaders, e.g., Henry McNeal Turner, Ida Barnett Wells, and Marcus Garvey, continued to organize and mobilize for racial justice and equality. This laid the foundation for a new generation of freedom fighters with the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s under the prophetic leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and others. The subsequent Black Power and Black Theology movements of the 1960s and 1970s kept this prophetic ethos alive, motivating churches to organize a wide range of outreach ministries and community services—food and clothing banks, family support, prison ministries, homeless shelters, health fairs, job training, political mobilization, etc.

The Demise of Prophetic African-American Leadership

In retrospect, the political enfranchisement and socio-economic mobility won by the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power initiative, uneven as they have been, also proved to be a mixed blessing for African-American churches in the Post-Civil Rights era. Positively, African-American churches have continued to proliferate in membership and buildings, even

migrating from inner-city neighborhoods to suburban communities. Further, we have witnessed the unprecedented growth of African-American megachurches in urban and suburban communities across the U. S., often attracting upwardly mobile middle-class members. Negatively, though, that same growth and mobility of African-American churches have led to their widening social dislocation from the plight of inner city African-American communities, still ravaged by poverty, high-crime rates, health-care disparities, under-funded schools, and a host of other social problems. Furthermore, more traditional mainline churches are experiencing dwindling membership and a failure to attract younger persons/families, especially African-American males. More tellingly, too many African-American pastors and churches can be accused of abandoning their historic mission of offering prophetic and holistic ministry to their communities. Marvin McMickle artfully captures this critique on his take of the 1955 Peter Seeger classic, "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?"

Where have all the prophets gone?
 Gone in search of megachurches, everyone.
 Where have all the prophets gone?
 Gone in search of faith-based funding, everyone.
 Where have all the prophets gone?
 Gone in search of personal comfort, everyone.
 Where have all the prophets gone?
 Gone in search of political correctness, everyone.
 Where have all the prophets gone?
 Gone in a ministry that places praise over speaking
 truth to power, everyone.
 When will they learn? When will they learn?¹

¹Marvin A. McMickle, *Where Have All the Prophets Gone? Reclaiming Prophetic Preaching in America* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 8.

The HIV/AIDS Pandemic As a Wake-up Call to African-American Churches

The resounding silence of too many African-American clergy and churches in the wake of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, both globally and nationally, is a dubious example of the abandonment of their prophetic leadership and holistic ministry. That this is the case despite the changing face of HIV/AIDS from predominately white gay man's disease when it was first diagnosed in the mid 1980s to a disease that now disproportionately affects African Americans is an appalling shame. While it is somewhat understandable why African-American clergy and churches were slow to respond in early years of the crisis, because of the flurry of unsubstantiated rumors and the stigma associated with homosexual activity, the continuing silence and lack of intervention has led to deadly consequences, particularly for the homeless and indigent, intravenous drug users, men who have sex with other men, and a growing number of heterosexual African-American women. While a number of recent studies on African-American church social activism indicates that they continue to provide a wide range of services to both their members and communities, few of these services include HIV/AIDS education, intervention, testing, care-giving, and advocacy.

A Case Study of Black-Church Intervention in Indianapolis

Four years ago, the writer encountered first-hand this wall of silence from African-American clergy and churches in Indiana when attempting to mobilize them for a HIV/Training event at Christian Theological Seminary (CTS), co-sponsored

by the Marion County Health Department (headed by an African-American woman), and led by a team from Interdenominational Theological Center's (ITC) Health Education and Leadership Project in Atlanta. After undergoing the training at ITC, I implored Dr. Monifa Jumanne, the project director, to schedule a training event for clergy and health-care workers in Indianapolis, to which she replied that there was already one set for Chicago. Insisting that we desperately needed one for Indianapolis, which was experiencing a major outbreak of STDs, she then assured me if a minimum of fifty persons were enrolled within three weeks, she would consider scheduling a training session. I returned to Indy on a mission and personally contacted every African-American pastor, church, health-care agency, and coalition for which contact information was available. The responses from African-American clergy were initially dismaying, ranging from disinterest in the subject to outright denial that an epidemic was taking place.

Still we persisted, and with the assistance of the Health Department and our two Minority Coalitions, we barely made our quota to host the event. In fact, we were under-registered; but Dr. Jumanne was assured that I would personally "hit the streets" to recruit the needed participants, even if some CTS students had to be coerced to attend. When the two-day training session finally commenced, we had successfully attained our quota—mostly laypersons, students, health-care workers, and a small number of pastors.

Three African-American male facilitators, one of whom was diagnosed as HIV positive, skillfully trained us to use the intervention curriculum entitled, *Affirming a Future with Hope: HIV & Substance Prevention for African American Communities of Faith*. This innovative curriculum, developed in 2001 at ITC, was intentionally prepared through collaboration

between the CDC and the historically Black seminaries and strategically targeted to African-American communities of faith of all persuasions. Thus, it had the added advantage over other HIV/AIDS curricula of being biblically and theologically grounded, culturally appropriate for African-American communities of faith, and espousing faith-based prevention strategies to a variety of constituents, including church leaders, clergy, youth, adult (men and women), youth, and seminarians.

Many but not all of the participants were able to successfully implement training classes in their respective communities of faith. For some, like Indy's Ebenezer Baptist Church and the Minority Health Coalitions, who were already immersed in HIV/AIDS education and prevention, this curriculum was a much-needed supplementary resource to address the spiritual and theological dimensions of the epidemic. One church, Robinson Community AME Church, used it in conjunction with their annual observance of the Balm in Gilead's Black Church Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS. The writer's congregation, Phillips Temple CME Church, incorporated the curriculum into its weekly Bible-study classes for youth and adults, with strong overall congregational and community participation. Additionally, several student participants from CTS assisted me in introducing the curriculum to the wider seminary through community forums and presentations in my "Pastoral Leadership" class. Our goal was to develop a mobile team of teachers from seminary who could provide both HIV/AIDS training and consultation to area congregations and agencies. In the coming year, we will do both: introduce several new courses focusing on the HIV/AIDS pandemic and infuse this subject in existing ministry, counseling, and ethics courses.

Based on follow-up evaluations, this preventive initiative

obviously had a positive impact on the small number of faith communities we reached, especially in promoting their awareness of the nature and prevention of the virus; and even more, firmly grounding this prevention in Christian faith and theology. However, without a comprehensive and coordinated plan for follow-up, the long-term effects of this training initiative are difficult to measure. But with the alarming rise of new cases of African-American persons infected with the HIV virus in Indianapolis since the training event, it is incumbent that African-American clergy, churches, and denominations strategically mobilize their resources to combat the spread of this deadly but preventable disease: providing compassionate care to persons and families living with HIV/AIDS and lifting their prophetic voices to advocate for equitable medical access and treatment for persons living with the virus.

Mobilizing African-American Clergy and Churches in the Twenty-First Century

To accomplish this daunting challenge in the twenty-first century, we as African-American clergy and churches will have to honestly confront our own complicity in the silence, denial, ignorance, and homophobia that is leading to preventable deaths in our churches and communities. Like the biblical prophet Jeremiah, we must "Shout out, and not hold back! Lift up our voices like a trumpet. Announce to the people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins."

Here are some broad-ranged and concrete strategies to help reconnect African-American churches with their biblical and historic roots as prophetic communities, preaching, and promoting holistic salvation. These include both personal salvation and social justice and combine both priestly and

prophetic ministry:

1) Develop a comprehensive HIV/AIDS program as part of churches' educational and outreach ministry to families, and aggressively target youth for training and intervention programs.

2) Equip teams in every congregation to offer care and support to HIV-infected persons and their affected families.

3) Rethink our culturally and religiously-embedded views on sexuality that impede acceptance and progress, engaging theologians and scholars who write on the history and dynamics of Black sexuality, e.g., Kelly Brown Douglas' *What's Faith Got to Do with It? Black Bodies/Christian Souls*.²

4) Advocate for local, state, and federal social policies that ensure and expand HIV/AIDS research, education, preventive services, testing, and medical and palliative services.

5) Partner with local, national, global HIV/AIDS services, health-care agencies, and schools to provide ongoing HIV/AIDS education, information, and prevention programs to churches.

6) Address the stigma of homophobia in African-American churches and communities, which may prevent persons from seeking prevention and treatment services.

7) Create safe places in African-American churches and communities where persons can be confidentially and regularly tested by caring and certified medical personnel.

²See Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It? Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005).

8) Join other churches to promote awareness and solidarity, observing World AIDS Day in December and the Balm in Gilead's Black Church Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS the first week in March.

In closing, the biblical paraphrase by African theologian and AIDS activist Musa Dube is a prophetic injunction to African-American clergy and churches:

I was sick with AIDS and you did not visit me. You did not wash my wounds, nor did you give me medicine. . . . I was stigmatized, isolated, and rejected because of HIV/AIDS and you did not welcome me. I was hungry, thirsty, and naked, completely dispossessed. . . .and you did not give me food, water, or any clothing. I was a powerless woman exposed to the high risk of infection and carrying a huge burden of care, and you did not meet my needs. . . .The Lord will say to us, 'Truly I tell you, as long as you did it to one of the least of these members in my family, you did it to me.'³

HIV/AIDS and African-American Churches: Selected Resources

Balm in Gilead Resources (<http://www.balmingilead.org>). *An HIV/AIDS Church School Curriculum* (downloadable); *Blessed Are They That Comfort: An Introduction to HIV/AIDS for Black Congregations*; *The Black Church Speaks! A Collection of Historical Sermons*.

³Donald E. Messer, *Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence: Christian Churches and the Global AIDS Crisis* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 76.

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