

Robert M. Franklin\*

## Introduction

In the years since the Civil Rights Movement, noteworthy changes and continuity are evident within African-American congregations—the institutions that guided the movement for renewing American democracy. This special edition of the *JITC* presents the results of an exciting research project conducted early in 2000—ITC/FaithFactor Project 2000 Study of Black Churches. This national scan represents the nation's most comprehensive and accurate survey of the African-American religious experience.

*Project 2000* surveyed historically African-American Christian denominations, produced a current and comprehensive database on the culture of Black congregational life and religious leadership, and funded a survey of leadership in the African-American Muslim community. The findings enable religious leaders, and others, to understand change and continuity in and around congregations and mosques—particularly regarding practices such as worship, spiritual growth, community outreach, institutional management, and strategic leadership.

One of the central themes of African-American religiosity is that spirituality and community outreach are inseparably linked. In the Gospel of Luke (4:16 ff), Jesus spoke of how the anointing of the spirit compelled him to preach good news to the poor and to serve other despised groups. The journey inward and the journey outward are not oppositional but complementary. *Project 2000* discovered that many Black congregations foster deep spirituality and profound confidence in the future assured by God. At the same time, the religious leaders interviewed reported overwhelming support for community

---

\*Robert M. Franklin is president, Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, Georgia.

service activities, social involvement, and political advocacy. These religious fellowships and their leadership mirror a spiritual reality that encompasses the whole person and the whole community. This is significant.

Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam has observed the unraveling of American civil society.<sup>1</sup> Despite the many barriers to community building and public life in North America, Black congregations—Christian and Muslim—refuse to retreat into narcissism and busy work. Like our Lord, it appears that they feel compelled to be publicly engaged. And, social engagement may even catalyze deeper spiritual growth and maturation, an insight that Howard Thurman<sup>2</sup> tried to convey decades ago.

This special issue of the *JITC* has three foci:

- To provide “thick” descriptions of the various contexts of religiosity among African-American peoples in North America, including mosques, storefront churches, megachurches, rural congregations, etc.
- To highlight some of the most significant findings contained in *Project 2000*.
- To offer interpretations of the meaning and significance of the data with hopes of broadening and enriching understanding of Black religion among congregational

---

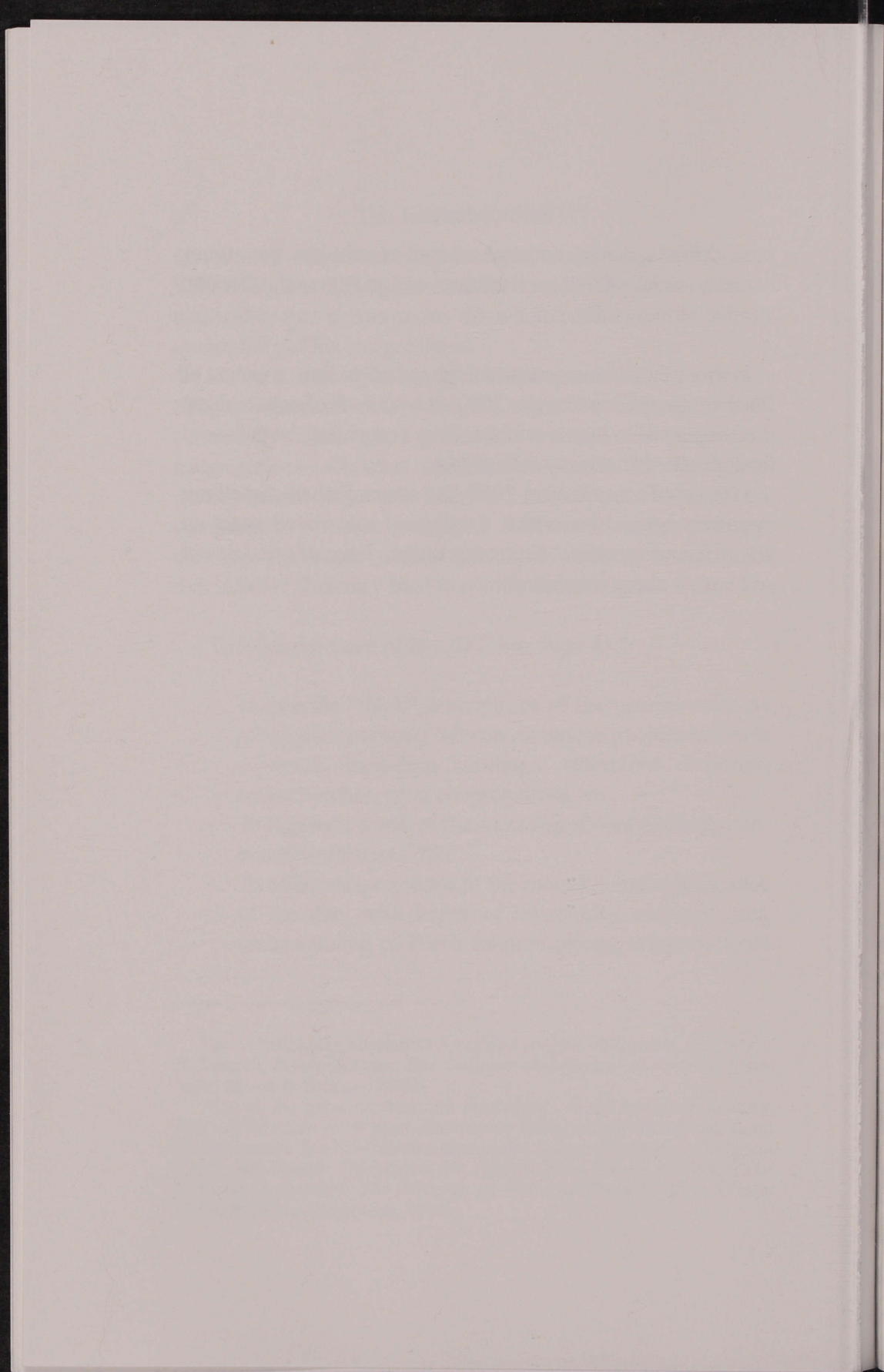
<sup>1</sup>For a challenging account of America’s societal disconnect, see Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

<sup>2</sup>One of the great mystics and theologians of the twentieth century, Howard Thurman wrote more than twenty books on spirituality and social consciousness. See his *Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and Social Witness* (Richmond, IN: Friends Press United, 1954) and *For the Inward Journey: The Writings of Howard Thurman* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984).

leaders, denominational executives, scholars, community stakeholders, philanthropists, government officials, and the media.

In short, this issue amounts to a “snapshot” in time, a picture of Black religious life in the year 2000. It is up to all of us to evaluate the images and to puzzle out how those images may be enhanced through effective ministry in the future.

ITC/FaithFactor Project 2000 has accomplished something important here. I know that it will have a positive impact on your life and vocation. Enjoy this unique issue of our *Journal* and pass it along to a friend!



**For I am convinced that neither death  
nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor  
things present, nor things to come,  
nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor  
anything else in all creation will be  
able to separate us from the love of  
God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

**Romans 8:38**

