



## **Missions and the Contemporary Black Church: A Theological and Cultural Exploration**

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### **Executive Summary**

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### **I. Summary of the Project**

Faith Partnerships Incorporated, a national network of faith institutions based in Raleigh, North Carolina, has initiated an international dialogue concerning new paradigms for Black church missions.<sup>1</sup> With funding from the Ford Foundation, Faith Partnerships assembled a delegation – including clergy, educators, community activists, and leaders of faith-based organizations – to travel to Ghana and South Africa. The delegation visited Ghana from April 10-13, 2007 and South Africa from April 14-22, 2007. The purpose of the visit was: 1) to gain a greater appreciation of the historical, cultural, and political contexts of various African communities and 2) to establish dialogue with African colleagues concerning current and future missions projects, including, but not limited to, educational, economic, and healthcare initiatives.

To further clarify the aim of the journey, the delegation was presented with the following questions:

- How effective is Black church missions work in the US and abroad today? To whom are Black churches accountable for the effectiveness of their efforts?
- Have Black churches and denominations considered all sources of help to sustain their efforts such as allies and partners in the US and Africa?
- How much are the values and concepts expressed in our definition of church missions work restrained by surrounding policies and politics?
- How does public policy impact the successful implementation of social and economic programs sponsored through church missions work?

## II. Principles for Contemporary Black Church Missions

In an effort to promote dialogue and new partnerships in Black church missions, the delegation traveling to Ghana and South Africa in April 2007 presents the following theological and cultural principles for more effective missions work in the Black church.

### 1. Black church missions should testify to the justice and compassion of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

God sent Jesus into the world as the embodiment of divine truth. Through his ministry, Jesus proclaimed God's *justice*, which involves the sharing of power and resources so that all might enjoy "abundant life" (John 10:10). Jesus also proclaimed God's *compassion*, which involves loving attention to the needs and hurts of a suffering creation and its many inhabitants (Luke 10:25-37). While the full manifestation of justice and compassion will occur in the coming Kingdom of God, Jesus compels his followers to foster justice and compassion until the Kingdom comes.

The English word "missions" is derived from the Latin verb *mitto*, which means "to send." Sending is at the heart of the Christian story. Just as God sent Jesus, Jesus also sends his disciples into the world to bring good news, to liberate, and to heal (Luke 4:18-19).

As we testify to God's justice and compassion in our missions work, we rejoice if persons with whom and to whom we minister accept the gospel of Jesus Christ and become disciples. Yet ultimately, the goal is not *how many* people believe in Jesus Christ because of us but rather *how much* people's lives are transformed because we believe in Jesus Christ.

### 2. Black church missions should foster ecumenism and interfaith respect.

The word "ecumenism" is derived from the Greek word *oikoumenē*, which means "the world." Thus, ecumenism is realizing that God's world is bigger and broader than the confines of any group's beliefs and experiences. An even clearer definition of ecumenism is found in the words of the familiar song, God's "got the whole world in His hands." The work of justice and compassion requires us to transcend many boundaries, even religious boundaries.

Whether we are digging wells in Accra, Ghana, establishing schools in Johannesburg, South Africa, or teaching business skills to at-risk adolescent girls in Atlanta, Georgia, we are committed to building alliances with persons who do not share our faith commitments. In a spirit of humility, we respect the presence of sacred truth found in other faith traditions, such as African Traditional Religion and Islam. By linking with and learning from persons of other faith perspectives, we all are enriched.

The African theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye has identified *ecumenism* as one of the cardinal issues of missions work in Africa. She remarks, "Africa is pluralistic, and that religious pluralism has to be acknowledged and lived in a creative manner...Mission is about the gospel, so we need to discern the good news not only as we know it in Christianity but also as it exists in the religion of 'the other'...Mission...demands prayer, wisdom, humility, openness, and sincerity."<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Black church missions should address identity and image issues among Black people.

In order to build effective alliances for transformation, Black church missions must raise and answer this question: Who are we as Black people? Historically, Black communities and families have stressed the connection between *identity* (who we are) and *behavior* (what we do).

For example, many Black young people who were leaving home for college, the military, or jobs had a grandparent or parent say to them, “Behave yourself because you are carrying the family’s name with you.” Black church missions should encourage Black people to reflect continually on what it means for us to carry the name of “Mother Africa” as part of our identity.

Certainly, social crises in many Black communities are related to concrete matters of political legislation, a lack of tangible resources, and limited access to healthcare and educational institutions. Yet it would be a mistake to reduce Black church missions merely to money or other material matters. Black church missions also must edify the “souls of Black folk,” and enhance Black self-worth.<sup>4</sup>

The vicious combination of white supremacy, Black self-hatred, and mismanaged Black political power has prompted Black people to murder Black bodies and maim Black souls at an alarming rate. Black on Black violence in the urban centers of the US, genocidal warfare in various African countries, and some Black people’s strange tendency to label themselves with a racially derogatory term of white supremacy reveal the lethal consequences of “mistaken identity.”

As an example of an identity issue, Black churches might make a concerted effort to teach more about African history. Typically, many Black churches talk about ancient Israel, Greece, or Rome, while failing to acknowledge that these civilizations were tutored by ancient Africa. There is a pressing need for education about past Black greatness in order to motivate us toward present and future Black greatness and self-sufficiency.

The dialogue about Black identity must be analytical and not superficial. Even as we acknowledge the strong cultural ties that unite Black people, we must examine critically the cultural differences among Black people around the globe. With candor and courage, Black church missions can assist communities in addressing foundational questions such as:

- What do Blacks in Africa think about Blacks in the Diaspora, and vice-versa?
- How do ethnic and national boundaries impact identity among Blacks in Africa?
- What role does economic status play in identity-formation among Black youth in the US?
- How might Blacks in the US and Blacks and “Coloured” persons in South Africa empower each other as they deal with post-segregation and post-apartheid social and political issues?<sup>5</sup>

Addressing such questions will identify the bonds we share as a result of possessing Black skin. It also will reveal that in missions work *color* is often only skin deep, and *culture* is the deeper and more important reality for effective partnerships.<sup>6</sup> The success of twenty-first

century Black church missions will rest in the willingness of participants to engage other cultures generously.

Furthermore, cross-cultural cooperation will require an investigation of problematic images of Africa held by many Blacks in the US. Some Black churches and Black scholars have sponsored important advances in African-centered approaches to culture and religion.<sup>7</sup> Still many congregants in Black churches consider Africa a “backwards” and “poor” continent.

Black church missions should challenge and correct these unfortunate images and communicate proudly that the entire world has been made rich by Africa’s brilliant and resilient people and considerable resources. Recently, an excellent example of the positive re-imaging of Africa and Africans occurred in the “mainstream” magazine *Vanity Fair*, where an article featured the pictures and profiles of seventy-one contemporary Africans with amazing accomplishments.<sup>8</sup>

A serious exploration of identity and image issues will emphasize the central role that women have played, and continue to play, in African cultures. On the journey, we encountered a robust appreciation for the leadership roles of women. Whether engaging in entrepreneurial ventures for the purchase of HIV/AIDS medications or planting and harvesting alongside men on a farm, African women are invaluable to the sustenance of their communities.

The centrality of African women was powerfully displayed in the symbolism and stories we encountered in South Africa. In the sanctuary of St. George’s Cathedral in Cape Town, there stands a stately statue of the Black Madonna – Mary the Mother of Jesus holding the infant Jesus. In the sanctuary of Regina Mundi Church in Soweto, there is a captivating painting of the Black Madonna.

The religious symbolism in these two churches not only pays homage to Mary the Mother of Jesus, it also celebrates the role of all African women in the struggles for survival and well-being. Furthermore, in one exhibit in the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, women’s participation in the anti-apartheid struggle is especially highlighted. In the exhibit, women are referred to as the “rock” and “boulder” that would eventually crush the forces of oppression. In Black communities world-wide, women continue to be strong forces for change and solid foundations for community transformation. *Consequently, missions work that empowers Black women will by definition enrich the larger Black community.*

#### **4. Black church missions should avoid a “neo-colonial” approach.**

Colonialism involves the oppressive use of race and gender for the political control and acquisition of other people’s land and resources.<sup>9</sup> Africa has been the object of centuries of colonial abuse, as political empires in Europe and the Americas repeatedly pillaged its human and natural resources. Many African nations were only liberated from colonialism in the 1950s-1970s and thus have enjoyed a half century or less of political independence. Consequently, the damage and memory of colonialism remain vivid on the continent.

While the political flags of former colonizers no longer wave over African nations, some former colonizers continue to exert a dominating cultural and economic influence in Africa. This continuing influence is often called “neo-colonialism.” Neo-colonizers, including nations

such as the US, England, and France, may not invade African *soil* as they once did. Now they attempt to influence the African *soul* through imposing western cultural values on African communities. *Neo-colonialism makes oppressive assumptions about the supposed inferiority of African customs.*

During the journey to Ghana and South Africa in April 2007, several African clergy spoke candidly to the delegation about the role of the Bible in the colonial and neo-colonial oppression of Africa. While the Bible is the sacred scripture of Christianity, oppressive interpretations of scripture have fostered the political and cultural domination of Africans. The familiar proverb captures this ambiguity: “When the Europeans came to Africa, they had the Bible, and the Africans had the land. When the Europeans left, the Africans had the Bible, and the Europeans had the land.”

The relationship between colonial Christianity and unjust biblical interpretation was evident as we visited the slave castle in Elmina, Ghana. In Elmina, the slave auction hall was underneath the chapel where Europeans were reading and preaching from the Bible. An inscription from Psalm 132:14 rests over the doorway of the church at Elmina Castle. Quite literally, colonial Christianity and its domineering readings of scripture were propped up by the backs and bones of enslaved Africans.

Undoubtedly, the Bible must be a central feature of Black church missions. Yet great caution is needed to ensure that the Black church engages scripture in indigenous and liberating ways in its missions work with African communities.<sup>10</sup> Otherwise, the twenty-first century Black church will oppress Africans with the Bible just as some white Christian missionaries have done over the centuries.

Furthermore, James Joseph, an ordained minister and former US Ambassador to South Africa, insists that cultural respect is a cure for neo-colonialism. Joseph briefed the delegation about African missions prior to our journey to the continent. He spoke about an advisory committee he chaired examining self-help traditions of low-wealth communities in southern Africa. Joseph remarked:

“We should respect local traditions. A Good Samaritan impulse runs deep in every culture. Communities may not have access to the kind of financial resources available to other communities. They often have self-help traditions and self-help vehicles that should be honored, respected, engaged as partners...[In southern Africa] we found many examples of how poor people help each other, and we are now trying to persuade private and corporate donors that before seeking to introduce western models of organized philanthropy, we should examine what possibilities exist for them to collaborate with and increase the capacity of indigenous vehicles.”<sup>11</sup>

Partnership must be a key concept in contemporary missions work. Countries and communities in the west can no longer adopt a paternalistic attitude and assume that they have everything to give to Africa and nothing to learn from Africa. A partnership model realizes that all participants in a missionary enterprise must balance teaching and learning, giving and receiving.

## 5. Black church missions should emphasize strategic change, not sporadic charity.

Charity, or love for the neighbor, is a central Christian value. One-time or occasional missions contributions of time and resources are noteworthy examples of neighborly love. Yet we might better exemplify our love by supporting ventures that continually benefit targeted communities.

In order to promote strategic, long-term change, Black church missions must: 1) re-envision its understanding of philanthropy; and 2) stress the importance of investment.

- New Understandings of Black Church Philanthropy

Prior to the journey, James Joseph outlined for the delegation the difference between philanthropy as charity and philanthropy as strategic transformation. According to Joseph, philanthropy as charity responds to “the immediate needs of people struggling to survive...philanthropy as relief does not address causation. People are much more likely to help ameliorate consequences than to seek to eliminate causes.”<sup>12</sup>

*On the contrary, strategic philanthropy understands that relief of suffering is temporary unless the causations of suffering are identified and transformed.* According to Joseph, strategic philanthropy sponsors communal engagements that:

“serve as a connective tissue, promoting the civic dialogue that strengthen the coherence and connection upon which society depends to thrive. Supporting and fostering civic participation is often helping people to help themselves...When neighbors help neighbors, even when strangers help strangers, both those who’ve helped and those who’ve been helped are transformed. A new connection is made that can lead to new forms of community because here philanthropy can generate not just the spirit of community, but even indigenous forms of giving. When people feel they have a stake in community, when they feel a sense of belonging, they are more likely to feel a sense of obligation...Missionary giving has too often been associated with charity rather than change. It has tended to be episodic, rather than strategic. While there may be great moral value in just doing good, complex social problems require analysis and understanding to determine the most constructive places to intervene. We can not only enhance our own capacity in that regard, but also we can enhance the capacity of the local church in missions as well. This is strategic philanthropy.”<sup>13</sup>

- The Importance of Investment

In the Parable of Talents, Jesus teaches about the importance of investment (Matthew 25:14-30). The two servants who expanded their resources by investing are rewarded, while the one servant who hides and hoards resources is punished. The parable encourages God’s people to use to the fullest whatever talent they may have.

As people of faith, the future reward we seek is defined by justice and compassion, not lust for power and profit. Historically, many people and organizations investing in Africa have not had Africa’s best interest at heart. *Thus, Black church missions must employ investment*

*practices that reflect the justice and compassion of the Messiah, not the fierce competition of the stock market.*

Friendship Missionary Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina is one of many churches embodying the call for godly, strategic investment. Under the leadership of its pastor, Clifford Jones, Sr., this church has pooled its monetary contributions to support South African economic development initiatives in Mabapone, a rural community near Pretoria. Instead of simply sending food and clothes, Friendship Church invests in tractors and sewing machines for this community. The returns on such investments will feed and clothe bodies and souls for years to come.

Ultimately, strategic change in local or global missions work will entail a serious commitment to teaching for capacity building. This equipping process will enable organizations to be self-sustaining. Esther Ramusi, a Black scholar and activist working in Cape Town, spoke passionately to the delegation about the *centrality of teaching*. She insisted:

“The South Africans fought apartheid for centuries, in a way of speaking. Now they are fighting AIDS. They haven’t had a chance to breathe or grow...I’m here to tell you teach our people. When you meet them on the street, if they make a mistake, don’t condemn them, please, I beg you. Just say, ‘No, no, baby, that’s not the way it should go. I think you need to do this to do that.’ They will not be annoyed with you. Teach. Teach...I’m telling you all, we need your support and not to feel sorry for us but to encourage our people. People don’t always need your money; they need your encouragement.”<sup>14</sup>

### **III. Conclusions and Beginnings...**

As we present this report, hope abounds for new conversations about and commitments to Black church missions. Speaking to the delegation prior to the journey, James Joseph declared that the instilling of hope may be the primary role of Black church missions.<sup>15</sup> Diana Hayes, a Black theologian, testifies to what hope in the Lord can and will do in Black communities:

“We are weavers of our future’s tapestry, one woven from the living, breathing souls of Black women, men and children in every walk of life, of every shade of skin from deep blue-black to palest peach-blushed tan, a tapestry woven from our common origin—Africa.”<sup>16</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In this report, “Black” is an inclusive term referring to people of Black African ethnic/racial descent in Africa and the African Diaspora (e.g., the United States and the Caribbean). The term “Black church” signifies any Black Christian congregation in the United States and especially those associated with the historic Black denominations: the African Methodist Episcopal Church; the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church; the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A.; the National Baptist Convention of America; the Progressive National Baptist Convention; and the Church of God in Christ. For further discussion, consult C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Trufant, a member of the delegation and Senior Pastor of the Emmanuel Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York, offered this insight.

<sup>3</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Three Cardinal Issues of Mission in Africa,” in *Mission in the Third Millennium*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 42, 45.

<sup>4</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1903; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of South Africa’s complex racial terminology, consult Anthony Butler, *Contemporary South Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 29-46. During apartheid, the term “Coloured” referred to persons in South Africa of “mixed” racial heritage. While the term historically carried negative connotations, many persons of this heritage still use the term proudly to identify themselves in post-apartheid South Africa.

<sup>6</sup> John Keith, a Canadian anthropologist and missionary, provided this insight in a personal conversation, August 19, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> For example, consult Andrew Billingsley, *Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 170-183.

<sup>8</sup> *Vanity Fair* (July 2007): 176-197.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Lewis Taylor, “Spirit and Liberation: Achieving Postcolonial Theology in the United States,” in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, ed. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 42.

<sup>10</sup> For an example of African approaches to Jesus, consult Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004). For other examples of Black contextual interpretations of the Bible, consult Brian K. Blount, ed., *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> James A. Joseph, Pre-Trip Conference Call, March 29, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> James A. Joseph, Pre-Trip Conference Call, March 29, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> James A. Joseph, Pre-Trip Conference Call, March 29, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Esther Ramusi, Presentation, Cape Town, South Africa, April 15, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> James A. Joseph, Pre-Trip Conference Call, March 29, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Diana L. Hayes, “My Hope Is in the Lord: Transformation and Salvation in the African American Community,” in *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 24.