

THE RESPONSE OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN FAITH COMMUNITY
TO THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

A CREATIVE PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

In a time of deepening skepticism about religious institutions, the black church in America continues to provide a structure of support for African Americans caught in the aftermath of the worst economic downturn in more than seven decades. Its growth and influence traceable to the country's history of slavery and discrimination, the black church has adapted its historic social mission in the face of economic setbacks that threaten decades of gains made by the black middle class (Washington, 2011).

This creative project examines these issues through the experience of a black congregation in Muncie, Ind., with an emphasis on the powerful rhetorical style of preaching that offers hope and encouragement on a social level, while underscoring the traditional religious themes at the heart of the black worship experience (LaRue, 2000). The project's video presentation documents that experience, including the vivid rhetorical style characteristic of the black church and considers the meaning of this experience for other Americans including white majority culture.

A central component of the creative project and the reason why this work is important centers on the unique qualities of the African American church experience, especially from the perspective of white Americans.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Statement of the problem	2
Setting and background	3
Chapter 2: Social challenges	5
Economic stress	6
Effects from long-term changes	7
Chapter 3: Role of religion	9
Message of hope	10
Pastor blends spirituality, encouragement	11
Faith's central question	13
Chapter 4: Method	17
Limitations	19
Role of digital storytelling	19
Nonverbal cues	20
Dimensions of interactivity	21
Further steps	22
Chapter 5: Conclusion	23
References	24

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Most white Americans, it is safe to say, have not experienced the fervent spirituality of the black church. After all, Sunday morning is the most segregated day of the week, as the saying goes – a perception famously articulated by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1963. To King, this division was part of the country's larger problem of segregation and discrimination:

"I must admit that I have gone through those moments when I was greatly disappointed with the church and what it has done in this period of social change. We must face the fact that in America, the church is still the most segregated major institution in America. At 11:00 on Sunday morning when we stand and sing and Christ has no east or west, we stand at the most segregated hour in this nation. This is tragic. Nobody of honesty can overlook this. Now, I'm sure that if the church had taken a stronger stand all along, we wouldn't have many of the problems that we have. The first way that the church can repent, the first way that it can move out into the arena of social reform is to remove the yoke of segregation from its own body" (King, 1963).

Early leaders in the black church did not choose to worship separately but were effectively forced into exile, according to Michael Battle, author of *The Black Church in America: African American Christian Spirituality* (Battle, 2006).

Blacks are no longer barred from attending white services, though many continue to support traditionally black churches, and those centers of worship remain the pillars of stability in many communities, especially in urban settings where their community support and programming to address social needs make them centers of community life.

Statement of the problem

Though they have made substantial progress since the darkest days of bigotry and discrimination, African Americans face continued social challenges related to economic status. The support network centered on the black church in many communities is a vital lifeline to some of those most in need. A project that documents the faith-based encouragement at the heart of this project can provide lessons for other Americans outside of those communities. Previous research has documented the role of rhetoric in the black worship experience. More recently have come developments in digital technology that transform the intensely personal experience of religion in this faith tradition by enhancing some of its most engaging characteristics via sound and video. Previous video projects, in the form of popular film documentaries, have concentrated on the social aspects of religion. This project focuses on the digital aspects of the worship

experience and the powerful, transformative message targeted toward congregations in the grip of economic stresses.

Setting and background

Union Missionary Baptist Church, the largest black congregation in Muncie, is typical of the community-pillar model of faith-based support. Deacon Willie Gholar, owner of a Muncie funeral home, has been a member nearly his entire life.

“We have members who are caring, and they are sharing. They don’t mind taking their financial resources and investing it into the church and into the programs that we have here.

“We have been impacted by the economy. And the church has responded to the needs of our members during this economic downturn. We have between 900 and 1,000 members, and I would say we serve on a yearly basis at least 5 percent of our membership.

“The members will contact me and let me know that they have a benevolent matter. And we have a Benevolent Fund, and that is used to help members with their rent, or mortgage payment, or utility bills.

“And in certain situations we help with prescription drugs. If we have a member who is a life-or-death situation

and they have to have certain medications but can't afford them, we do help them.

“The people don't come because they want to. They come because they have to. They have no alternative. So we try to see what's going on with that individual. They have an immediate need – but what's going to happen next month? We're concerned about helping you now. But what's going to happen next month and the month after that?”

CHAPTER 2: SOCIAL CHALLENGES

The tradition of mutual economic aid combined with social activism began in the 19th century, according to Andrew Billingsley in his book, *Mighty Like a River: the Black Church and Social Reform*.

The black church's most vivid confrontations with social issues occurred during the civil rights movement. But Billingsley notes that the church as an institution was initially cautious. He writes that Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala., where the Montgomery bus boycott was organized in a basement meeting room, dismissed Pastor Vernon Johns for taking too tough a stance on segregation.

"The Rev. Johns was fired for his confrontation with segregation, which brought discredit onto the church. In choosing (Johns' replacement) Dexter Avenue Church thought it had opted for a safer and less confrontational pastor."

The new minister was Martin Luther King.

"King was expected to take care of church business and stay out of the streets, while Johns had been accused of

doing the opposite. And until Rosa Parks precipitated the crisis, King did just that.” (Billingsley, 2003)

Economic stresses

Segregated buses made their final stops long ago, but the echoes of economic inequity persist in the present time – fueled by the Great Recession of 2007-09. As a result, black America today faces one of its most serious challenges since the Jim Crow era – an economic downturn that threatens to push millions of African-Americans from the middle class into poverty (Washington, 2011).

As Algernon Austin, director of the Economic Policy Institute’s Program on Race, Ethnicity and the Economy told The Associated Press: “The recession is not over for black folks.” Federal Reserve data shows that between 2004 and 2009, the median net worth of black households fell 83 percent, the AP reported in July 2011. The decline was 24 percent for white households.

In March 2010, about the time this project started, unemployment among black men peaked at 19 percent nationally. Unemployment among black youth (aged 16-19) reached 49 percent that September (Jacobson, 2011). A year later - two years after the Great Recession officially ended - unemployment for black Americans remained at double the national rate.

Joblessness for African Americans actually got worse after the recession ended in 2009. Department of Labor statistics show that when the recovery started in June 2009, black unemployment was just under 15 percent. In June 2011, the rate was 16.2. For black teenagers, the rate was 31 percent (Jacobson, 2011). In Indiana, black

unemployment averaged 19.8 percent in 2010, highest among any of its neighboring states but Michigan, at 23.9 percent (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 2010).

Effects from long-term changes

Union Missionary Baptist Church saw its weekly collection drop sharply in the spring of 2010, with receipts averaging about \$1,000 less per week than normal. Tough times in Muncie have been a long time in coming, Gholar said:

“When I talk to people, they’re concerned about the economy. They’re concerned about their children and what the future’s going to hold for them.

“We had an automotive-driven economy in Muncie. When I graduated from high school in 1965, I could go to any factory in this town and get a job. And there was a bunch of them.

“The major factories were Delco Battery, Chevrolet Muncie, Borg-Warner, Westinghouse, Owens-Illinois. Then you had a lot of spinoff factories and foundries.

“There were so many spinoffs. But when those jobs started drying up, then you had a domino effect. You were not

only losing those major businesses, but everybody that was around them.”

CHAPTER 3: ROLE OF RELIGION

Religion, meanwhile, also slipped in influence even as the nation's economy reshaped itself. In 1957, a Roper Poll found that 85 percent of people said they believed religion could answer all or most problems. By 2006, that level of belief was 58 percent (Roper, 2006). A 2010 Pew Research poll found that more Americans believe religion is losing its influence – 67 percent, compared with 59 percent who thought so in 2006. Gallup research turned up similar results – a near-record high 70 percent of people who see religion losing influence in America, close to the all-time rate of 75 percent in 1970.

Young adults, meanwhile, are more likely than adults to say that Americans are divided over religion – rating religion nearly as divisive as politics (Neroulis, 2011).

Message of hope

The black church, on the other hand, is feeling an increased need for its historic role as a social institution and a source of spiritual support, against the backdrop of historical discrimination, the long decline in lucrative factory jobs, a severe recession and then an agonizingly slow recovery. While some members of the congregation receive material assistance, the biggest impact is at the weekly services where Biblical lessons are mixed with a powerful message of hope.

The impact for a first-time visitor is remarkable. Cleophus James LaRue described the experience in his book, “The Heart of Black Preaching.”

"Many black preachers seem to possess a genius for the melody of words and the details of scene. Henry Mitchell has noted the enthusiastic response of African American congregations to beautiful language and well-turned phrases.

“The traditional black church expects and appreciates rhetorical flair and highly poetic language in the preaching of the Gospel.

“Such rhetorical tools in the hands of a skillful black preacher can evoke a sense of God's awe and mystery in the listening congregation.

“Unlike many European and mainline American denominations, where architecture and classical music inspire a sense of the holy, blacks seek to accomplish this act through the display of well-crafted rhetoric” (LaRue, 2000).

LaRue notes that many black preachers slow their delivery, time their pauses, and chant their phrases, using what he calls an age-old formula for preaching:

Start slow
Rise high

Strike fire
Sit down in a storm

The spiritual intensity of the black church is an exuberant if rarely seen side of black culture outside of church on Sunday mornings. Sundays at Union and churches like it are not quiet – at least for long.

Pastor blends spirituality, encouragement

At the heart of the service is “the message.” A major theme for the Rev. W.J. Jackson Sr., Union’s pastor for more than 25 years, is, yes, times are bad. But hold on. Faith has an answer to tough times. You are not forgotten.

The minister starts quietly to build on that idea, telling the story of Caleb in the book of Joshua, Chapter 14, and a promise from God that took 45 years to fulfill. The pastor uses that example to say that today as well, promises might also take awhile to be fulfilled. Prayers might take awhile to be answered.

Delivery is critical. At one point Jackson tells older members of the congregation to remember everything they have been through, waiting for things to get better.

“Let me just talk to my older saints, to those who are 70
and 80, and 85, and getting close to 90.

“If I asked you, ‘How did you make it?’

“How did you make it? You came shortly after the Great Depression, and you’re still here. You had to deal with World War I and World War II and the Korean War and Vietnam, and you’re still here.

“You had to raise children by yourself, and you’re still here. You had a number of medical diseases and challenges, but you’re still here.

“You had a hard time getting jobs and making it through very tough times, but you’re still here.

“And if I asked you today, ‘How did you make it?’ you ought to be able to say what Caleb said: ‘God has kept me.’

“Hey! The Lord has kept me. And the reason I know my 80-year-old saints can say that is because I’m not there yet. But I want to tell you – the Lord has kept me.

“I’ve been through the storm and rain, but the Lord has kept me. Anybody here been through some hard times? Had some trials and tribulations? But thank you, Jesus, you brought us all the way.

“Hey! He’s kept me! Can I get a witness? (Singing:) When friends abandoned me, the Lord kept me. When I had nobody on my side, even when Mama and Daddy forsook me, the Lord picked me up.

“The Lord has kept me, and that’s why I’m here. That’s why I made it - The Lord has kept me.” (W.J. Jackson, service on Oct. 24, 2010.)

Faith’s central question

A central problem for any religion is the difficult question, Why do bad things happen to good people? St. John of the Cross talked about “the dark night of the soul.” Here’s how Pastor Jackson answers the question, relating it to his own struggle with faith:

“When life is no longer making any sense, when it won’t add up. When those whom you have depended upon for encouragement and refreshment are not there, it gets dark.

“Anybody besides me ever walk in the darkness of life’s experience?

“In the dark we visit a place called desperation. Not a physical place, there’s not a ZIP code to this place. There’s

no real address, it's not a city or state. It is the emotional experience of a child of God as they walk through the darkness.

“We visit a place called desperation. And while we meander around and stumble around and blunder around in total darkness, we eventually move from the place of desperation to the place of deliberation, when we start to reflect deeply.

“It's asking questions about that which we're reflecting on – ‘How did I get here?’

We speak to our mind and we want a rational response – ‘What is the reason? Make this make sense to me. I know where I am – I'm in the dark. It's the darkness of desperation.’

“But what I demand from my logical side is, give me the reason I am here. I've been trying to live for Jesus – why am I here? I'm more committed than I've ever been in my life – why am I here? Giving God the best of me for the

first time in my life – Why am I here? I’m deliberating. I need somebody to answer that question.

“Oh God, now this is the part that makes me want to shout. Thank God, that though I spent a lot of time in the dark – somebody needs to witness when I finish this statement – I have discovered that sooner or later... I bump into a place called devotion.

“And it is there that I begin to rehearse through religious activity what I know about God. I’m still in the dark, but somehow I blunder around in the dark and end up at a place called devotion.

“I start rehearsing, when I was 9 years old about God, and I play that stuff back in my mind. And all of a sudden after a while, not the first day or the second day, but way after awhile, when I’m in this place called devotion I look around and it’s not as dark as it was last week.

“It’s not as dark! And in two or three weeks it’s not as dark as it was last week. And pretty soon I blunder out of

darkness into God's marvelous light – and it's shouting
time!

“Oh yes, thank you God! Oh yes. Thank you, God. Thank
you for having some light at the end of life's darkest
tunnels. Thank you, God.

“It's hard to preach this kind of message in a settled mood:

“There have been a whole lot of dark tunnels.”

CHAPTER 4: METHOD

The producer of this creative project was attracted to the subject after attending emotional services in the black church tradition or writing about those services as a reporter for The Associated Press and The Indianapolis Star. One case involved the funeral for a child, the recipient of a five-organ transplant in Kentucky, who later died. In another case, he produced a multimedia report using images and sound from an African American funeral in Indianapolis. He also witnessed an extremely emotional service in the Pentecostal tradition while on assignment in Philadelphia.

The producer was raised in the Roman Catholic Church and attended parochial or church-related schools from grammar school through college. His university experience included two semesters of theology and two semesters of philosophy, and as an adult he was a youth ministry volunteer, church choir member and volunteer in numerous civic settings, including Big Brothers-Big Sisters. It was through the lens of this background and experience that the producer was intrigued by the powerful spirituality of the black church. In 2009, therefore, after research into the African American faith community in Muncie, Ind., he approached the leadership of Union Missionary Baptist Church and secured their cooperation in producing a short video documenting the response of the African American faith community to the economic crisis.

Assisted by Ball State Telecommunications faculty members, he gathered video of services at the church. To more fully understand the subject, he volunteered as a member of the church's Media Ministry, and has worked with that team since then,

operating a camera, video switcher, training students in the media center and providing guidance on producing audio and video pieces for the church. During the course of the year-long experience at the church more than a dozen interviews were conducted to understand the mechanism for building the worship experience and to obtain first-hand accounts of the church's influence and its personal effect on members of the congregation.

The use of video in this project is critical to convey as faithfully as possible the immersive, emotive power of the black worship experience. While the writer is not of this faith tradition, and maintained a professional distance while researching the project for more than a year, he was nonetheless able to register the impact of the vivid style of preaching in the black church.

Other video projects, in the form of the best-known religious documentaries of recent years, have not focused on this aspect of the religious experience.

Religulous, (Bill Maher, 2008), may best be summed up in a single quote by Maher from the film: "The irony of religion is that because of its power to divert man to destructive courses, the world actually could come to an end."

Jesus Camp, (Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady, 2006), covers the sometimes troubling experiences of children at an intensely religious summer camp known as Kids on Fire.

The Root of All Evil? The God Delusion, (Richard Dawkins, 2006) is a highly critical look at religion, especially Islam.

Trembling Before G-d, (Sandi Simcha DuBowski, 2001) tells the stories of gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews trying to reconcile religious faith and their sexuality.

Limitations

The study's aim of understanding the black worship experience in a modern, digitally-enhanced context would have benefitted from a more robust filmmaking effort, instead of the approach adopted in this project. The researcher recognizes that peak moments of spirituality and congregational fervor are by definition special events. In trying to capture those moments, it would be good to have a full video crew dedicated for the entire year. For financial reasons, this was not possible, so the moments in the video that portray the peak worship experience – the pastor's "storm and rain" and "dark tunnels" sermons – were built from audio recordings, which are made at every service. Stills taken during the services were combined with the audio recordings to produce audio slide-show segments that attempted to capture the emotive essence of the pastor's best sermons. Ideally, the producer would embed a camera crew each week in the service to capture moments like those in live video.

Role of digital storytelling

At the center of the emotional power that is expressed in these spiritual settings is a remarkable blend of oral tradition and modern digital storytelling. In these religious

services, there's a quality of total immersion, of being pulled in – first by the emotive power of the minister's words and delivery, and then by the tools of digital presentation in the form of a powerful sound system, video cameras and digital projectors. In some way, the digital portals overshadow the traditional face-to-face oral tradition. The modern black church is a place of transition, not only in the sense of outside pressures from the economy and society, but in bridging the gap of expectations and functionality between the centuries-old, face-to-face, oral tradition to 21st century digital-visual storytelling. The oral, face-to-face culture still lives in these houses of worship, but increasingly the black church is augmenting that immersion with a digitally-enhanced reality –enhanced not only for the congregation in the pews, but for those who later receive the church's audio CDs and video DVD recordings.

Nonverbal cues

The communications impact goes beyond words. Normally in oral, face-to-face culture the power of experience is generated by physical closeness, the intensity, the distance, the sound of the voice.

Nonverbal cues feed the experience, as explained by James C. McCroskey, in citing work by Albert Mehrabian of UCLA:

“In normal human communication, Mehrabian estimates that 55 percent of the social meaning stimulated in the communication process is a direct result of facial and physical nonverbal messages. Further, he estimates that 38

percent of the meaning is stimulated by vocal cues – not the words said, but the way in which they are said.”

(McCroskey, 2005).

Dimensions of interactivity

McCroskey writes that interactivity in oral, traditional, face-to-face communication is based on dimensions of touch, proximity, seeing the emotional reactions on the listener’s face – instantaneous feedback that reinforces understanding and interactivity. In the modern, sound- and video-enhanced worship experience of the black church, the face-to-face immersive experience is replaced with an immersion based on the visuals that the digital equipment creates: The congregation sees the pastor’s face on a big screen – along with the faces of those in the choir and fellow members of the congregation.

In effect, the church has replaced the immersion caused by face-to-face oral communication with a new kind of immersion caused by digital manipulations. McCroskey notes the importance of source credibility based on such factors as expertness and trustworthiness, as well as the role of “perceived caring” on the part of the source, “specifically, the amount of empathy, understanding and responsiveness. Empathy is understood as being able to take the view of the other person; understanding refers to caring about the other person’s concerns, and responsiveness relates to a willingness to understand the other person’s problem and help correct it.” (McCroskey, 1992).

Further steps

Beyond this paper and the video, the producer volunteered at the church in its Media Ministry program and trained youth members in the operation of the church's video cameras, switcher, digital video recorder and video editing equipment. No end date has been set for this involvement, but the intention is to help the church begin a weekly video edition of its main services, digitally recorded and distributed by DVD.

Additionally, the producer is working with Pastor W.J. Jackson Sr. to show the video to a student audience on the campus of Ball State University during Black History Month in February 2012. The intention is help foster a dialogue between Ball State's largely white student body and the African American community in neighboring Muncie.

The producer is also talking with management and production executives at two PBS affiliate television stations in Muncie and Bloomington, Ind., about producing televised community forums based on the video. Discussions in Muncie include raising the production costs for a televised forum. In Bloomington, WTIU-TV will underwrite the production costs and has asked the producer to show the video and join a discussion panel.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Just as American culture has benefited from black musical, literary and other contributions, the African American community has much to offer in another respect - how to survive tough times. As the personal testimonies of believers in church are a witness to the power of their religion, the struggle and victories of a community hard-hit by the economy are a secular witness to the power of a culture – and the ability of people to support each other in tough times. Unemployment during the Depression was about 25 percent, a crushing spiritual and economic blow to millions of families, an experience that helped shape American culture for at least two generations. Yet unemployment at nearly that level was faced by African-American men even as the country began recovering from the last recession. Just as many of today’s middle-aged adults learned something from their parents about surviving tough times during the Great Depression, it could be that African American culture today can teach white America about holding on, about the place of faith in their lives – and about the character of a community that stands together in bad times and celebrates the good.

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