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Caribbean Migrant Experiences in Church and Society

J A George Irish
CUNY Medgar Evers College

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Cover Page Footnote

Address was presented at the Conference of New York Theological Seminary, October 1994.

Caribbean Migrant Experiences in Church and Society

By J A George Irish

Introduction

One of the greatest ironies of the Caribbean community in New York is, that it is at one and the same time, both “power-full” and powerless. Its power lies essentially in a relatively untapped and latent potential, whereas its powerlessness rests in its virtual immobilization as an ethnic group. By dint of sheer numbers the Caribbean presence, whether solely anglophone/West Indian, or more broadly representative of the wider Caribbean Basin, is a formidable force to reckon with, since over 30 percent of the immigrant population of New York is Caribbean. In fact, they are among the fastest growing immigrant groups. Just a cursory look at the Labor Day Carnival in Brooklyn provides dazzling proof of a dynamic physical presence that has explosive social, cultural, and economic potential, which has not yet been harnessed for a sustained development agenda capable of transforming the political image and influence of Caribbean immigrants in New York.

Few people can challenge the intellectual contributions and creativity of Caribbean immigrants in their diverse spheres of activity. From elementary school and the crafts and trades, through high school and the hallways of academia, the superways of history are strewn with garlands left by valedictorians, scholars, orators, inventors, and Nobel laureates. Undoubtedly, Caribbean leadership in this city has played no mean role in the social and political life and history of New York. The names of Marcus Garvey, Claude McKay, Hulan Jack, James S. Watson, J. Raymond Jones, Shirley Chisholm, and Constance Baker Motley decorate the corridors of power at all levels. And yet, somehow, the story of our collective life and achievement is characterized by powerlessness, punctuated with reversals and stagnation in areas where the promise of success was always inspiring—education, the justice system, small business sector, and alternative financial institutions. Periods when Caribbean immigrants were known primarily for their academic skills and passion for learning, or for steering clear of the police and the long arm of the law, or for the vision of the Paragon Progressive Community Association and Federal Credit Union, are now sentimental memoirs of the past.¹

The undeniable reality today is that many of our youth are faring badly in school; many are dropping out or being truant; many are in low-performing schools that are under



state review now; many are in the juvenile justice system through PINS (Persons in Need of Supervision), or in correctional facilities. Foreign-born inmates in the state prison system, who are from the Caribbean, have increased over 170 percent during the past decade and account for one of the largest foreign groups in custody. So when we speak of powerlessness, it is this lurid scenario that poses a challenge to the community as a whole, and to the Church, in particular. To confront this challenge, some serious self-definition, self-scrutiny, and self-focus is vital on the part of religious leaders and institutions.

Self-Definition

In the context of our discussions today the migrant “Church” has to define itself before it can chart any effective mission. It must be decided whether to operate within the “mainstream” only, or whether to engage the “periphery”; and even then, one has to determine who decides what is mainstream or “established,” and what is peripheral or cultist. Colonial heritage has bequeathed to us certain clear cut definitions which one may choose to abandon in order to accommodate or embrace a broader spectrum of religious persuasions within the Afro-Christian community. One has to decide definitively with whom one wishes or intends to associate as part of the initial strategy for facing up to the challenge.

One logical question for the migrant community is: To what extent is this consultation open to evangelicals and fundamentalists, or by extension to revivalists, Spiritual Baptists (Shango worshippers), Pocomania, Vodun, Santeria, etc. A second follow-up question would be: Being away from the home base with all its inherent

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social biases, is it possible for immigrants in a particular ethnic community to engage in interfaith dialogue on their adopted home turf? A third and inevitable one must be: To what extent has the ecumenical spirit of the Caribbean Conference of Churches (multinational, multid denominational, and multilingual) been transferred to the new home ground?

Self-Scrutiny

These basic questions are intended to lead into the issue of self-scrutiny. The migrant church inherits a dual legacy, the colonial sense of history that even newly-independent states have not yet overcome, and a novel metropolitan, cultural style that is part of the multicultural amalgam forged in large urban environments. The former nurtures a traditional model and mission that often resists change and outreach; the latter is an overwhelming awareness of the powerful value of money in church affairs.

It would be of great interest to investigate how many church leaders truly see the Church as a change agent, or how they perceive change. For many, the Church's mission is often restricted to a narrow vision of evangelism and discipleship without the concomitant thrust for stewardship and outreach. This has adversely impacted the Church's role in matters related to education, employment, health, immigration, and housing. Besides, the negative attitudes to counseling, psychotherapy, and politics have prevented many families and individuals from developing and contributing personally to a wider process of community development. The history of Caribbean churches and their relationship to governments has not fostered any major social outreach. Apart from the Roman Catholic schools, the Seventh Day Adventist schools, hospitals and colleges, and a few isolated cases, the Church has generally left this side of social services to the governments. The immigrant church leadership has inherited that outlook and avoided the risk-taking involved with major investments in these services to their constituents and parishioners.

The Church's capacity as an agent of change and a social facilitator requires sound organizational and institutional reappraisal. The proliferation of Caribbean churches, community-based organization, benevolent societies, and fledgling small businesses has denied the Caribbean immigrant community of any significant and enduring historical institutions that have been able to serve as de facto instruments of change and development. At another level the Church is frequently bedeviled or blessed with ministers who work full-time outside of the Church and may or may not lack formal training, or who have very scarce human and financial resources, thus imposing severe limitations on the scope of the operations of the Church.

This raises further questions about the kind of administrative training provided for ministers within the established curriculum, as well as the possibilities for short-term, tailor-made courses for practicing clergy.

Self-Focus

The primary challenge for the Church in its broadest sense and its training arm, the seminaries, is to re-examine its philosophy, mission, and leadership style in the face of the basic needs and social realities of its membership and the surrounding community. The principle of stewardship involves more than just members' responsibilities to meet their financial and service obligations to the Church. It extends their duties to the family, at the workplace, and in society at large. It, therefore, speaks volumes about parenting skills, work attitudes, fiscal management, and civic duties. In this regard, the Church ceases to be just pulpit-centered and assumes the practical role of an educational and training forum to equip people with survival strategies for an increasingly difficult world. Inspirational messages on salvation, spiritual growth, and the "prosperity theology" have to be matched by informational groundings for social transformation, industry, productivity, sacrifice, and service.

The Church needs to transform its auxiliaries into informed action groups that are agents of change.

Similarly, outreach must evolve out of stewardship and lead to advocacy and activism. The Church needs to transform its auxiliaries into informed action groups that are agents of change. It is not enough to have knowledgeable and talented youth, men, and women meeting for prayer and Bible study, or socializing in sacred oblivion to the stark realities crying out for their urgent attention. The Church must also respond to instances where:

- Caribbean students are being pushed into special education classes as learning disabled, hearing impaired, defective in speech, simply because there is an initial difficulty in communication;
- Caribbean youth are incarcerated as first offenders, some naively, some innocently, some under false arrests, simply because no one is available to demand their release nor provide character references, nor monitor the legal process to ensure that justice is not only done, but is seen to be done;
- Caribbean families are disintegrating, facing difficulties of transition and adjustment from the home society and social environment to a new setting, because no formal structures and services are in place to provide early orientation and support for new arrivals; and,
- Caribbean families are being shattered by the effects of deportation, drugs, and violence.

This daunting backdrop is a clarion call for the Church to adopt a more assertive and aggressive stance as the premier social institution of the Caribbean immigrant

community. The Church needs to consider how to organize effective services like transitional programs for immigrants and families, a parent empowerment program, citizenship drives and a voter education and registration drives, and programs aimed at improving economic and community development.

These are some of the issues and areas where denominational barriers need to fall and give way to coalition-building and the interfaith ecumenical spirit. Neighborhoods can be reclaimed, reconstructed, and redirected through collaborative ventures that bury self-interest and earnestly pursue the common ground. Herein lies the resolution of the dichotomy cited in the initial irony around power. The powerless and fragmented immigrant community has no sound political or financial springboards from which to leap forward. However, the Church can offer the leadership consciousness that can support institution-building, and thereby unleash the potential for powerful explosion.

Note

¹Clyde G. Atwell, *A Passion to Survive: A Credit Union Grows in Brooklyn* (New York: Pageant-Poseidon, Ltd., 1976), documentary.

J A George Irish serves as executive director of the Caribbean Research Center at Medgar Evers College/ City University of New York. He is also a professor of Caribbean and Latin American Studies in the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies at the college.