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Introduction

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Introduction

by James Jennings

In the 1980s and 1990s numerous studies about the status and future prospects of the Black community in the United States were published. Unfortunately, too many of these studies ignored the historical role that the Black Church has played in the economic and political development of the Black community in this country. Some scholars and researchers, as well as others in civic arenas, have overlooked not only the historical and institutional resiliency of the Black church, but the current work of this institution in the areas of social, cultural, and educational empowerment of people of African descent in the United States.

As historian Andrew Billingsley has pointed out, the Black Church is actually the very “first community institution” owned, operated, and directed by Black people, even during the period of Black enslavement. Many Black churches have pursued a “holistic ministry” providing a range of services to the community, including services in the area of health, housing, education, and economic development. But this is not a new development. As our first essay illustrates, published by George E. Haynes in 1928, the Black Church was involved in improving living conditions in Black communities a long time before government, foundations, or universities adopted an interest in this area.

The Black Church is still, as it was when Blacks were enslaved in this country, the most prominent institution in this community. It is in the Black Church that we find some of the most committed individuals working to empower the Black community. The Black Church generally commands impressive assets, such as land, economic independence, entrepreneurship, and volunteerism.

In order to understand and appreciate the critical importance of the Black Church in the empowerment of Blacks and, indeed, other communities of color in the United States, I am pleased to introduce the Spring 1997 issue of the *Trotter Review*. As noted above, we begin this issue with a reprinting of an essay by George E. Haynes, originally published in 1928, as part of a report issued by the Commission on the Church and Race Relations and sponsored by the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America. Haynes described the involvement of the Black Church in the Black community during the 1920s, and illustrates the critical role that this institution played in the social and economic, as well as spiritual, survival of Black people in this country. Special appreciation and thanks are extended to Sage Publications for allowing us to reprint this important article.

The distinguished professor of Black Studies at The Ohio State University, William Nelson, provides a review of how the Black Church was involved in one of the biggest and most important events organized by the Black community under the leadership of Minister Louis

Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam: the Million Man March. On October 16, 1995, more than one million men congregated in Washington D.C. to pay homage to the teachings of Black religious institutions in the United States. In a related topic, historian Frederick C. Harris shows how a broad range of political involvement of the Black Church is generally supported by members of the congregation. His research, based on a review of polls, has uncovered significant support, but still some ambivalence, regarding this matter. Professor Hubert Walters, one of the original founders of the Kuumba Singers at Harvard University, also provides some historical information explaining that the Black Church is the foundation of commercial Black music today.

Despite the work of the Black Church in democratizing United States society, this institution has been threatening to some groups. As a symbol of political and economic independence and resistance, Black churches have been bombed and its members terrorized. As we know, this situation is not just past history, but continues as a major problem today. Journalist Salim Muwakkil shares some thoughts with our readers regarding the recent reemergence of Black church bombings.

In an important article bridging the experiences of the Black Church in the United States with the Black Church in England, Paul Grant describes some of the challenges facing the latter. As is the case in the United States, the Black Church in England has opportunity to be involved in improving living conditions for all people through work in the social and economic arenas of people’s lives. But it must overcome its hesitancy to utilize and endorse radical social change in British society.

Dr. Marjorie B. Lewis proposes in her article that partnerships between the Black Church and non-profits, and government is a relatively new and effective policy tool for urban communities challenged by poverty. It is critical to examine and utilize this tool due to the failures of earlier policy efforts aimed at social and urban crisis. She highlights a few places where public sector and Black church partnerships seem to be effective. Dr. Sylvia Johnson writes about a new effort to link foundations with the Black Church in the interests of community and economic empowerment. Under the leadership of Dr. Johnson and her colleagues at The Hyams Foundation in Boston, Massachusetts, this foundation has taken a lead in building models of collaboration with Black churches. Many foundations across the nation are watching this initiative carefully in order to plan similar efforts in their own cities.

Another local effort is highlighted by Dr. Stephanie Athey of Stetson University in Florida. She describes the mission and work of the Dr. Howard Thurman Center in DeLand County, under the directorship of Reverend Jefferson P. Rogers. Dr. Howard Thurman served as a leading theologian for advancing knowledge and developing appropriate relationships with political, social, and economic institutions through application of the resources of the Black Church.

The last essay in this section by Dr. Cheryl Townsend

Gilkes helps to make the point that the basis of the work of the Black Church is still spiritual. The author illustrates that the motivating force behind the political, economic, and social work of the Black Church is the Sacred. As we discuss how the Black Church is involved in a range of facets of Black life, this observation cannot be overlooked for it explains the commitment, energy, and sacrifice that is corralled in service towards a more democratic and just society.

In the *Commentary* section of this issue, we begin with a review essay of Dr. Samuel Dewitt Proctor's recent work, *The Substance of Things Hoped For: A Memoir of African-American Faith*. The reviewer, Dr. Donald Cunnigen, discusses Dr. Proctor's book within the context of the values that seems to have guided Dr. Proctor's faith and scholarship. The following piece highlights an organization dedicated to involving the Black Church more aggressively in the economic and civic empowerment of the Black community. Dr. Harold W. Horton, associate director of the Trotter Institute, interviews Dr. Robert Franklin who was recently appointed director of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia. As such, Dr. Franklin will seek to expand and facilitate church-based institutions and partnerships with organizations focusing on the social and economic improvement of Black communities.

Ms. Kimberly Moffitt, currently pursuing a doctorate in

communications at Howard University, provides a profile of an individual who epitomizes the history, work, and commitment of the Black Church towards the social, economic, and political empowerment of the Black community. I am honored that this issue of the *Trotter Review* is featuring a brief profile of the Reverend Michael E. Haynes of Twelfth Baptist Church in Roxbury, Massachusetts. Reverend Haynes is not only a friend of The Trotter Institute, but a role model for many people in Boston and throughout the country. He has embodied in his religious, professional, and political work the impact that the Black Church can have in improving the lives of all people in our society.

James Jennings is director of The Trotter Institute and professor of political science at University of Massachusetts Boston. He is the author of a number of books, including *Blacks, Latinos, and Asians in Urban America* and *Race, Politics, and Economic Development: Community Perspectives*.