

B_{lack} H_{istory} M_{onth}

CONTRIBUTED STORY
FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

In 1899, when a black minister stepped into the pulpit, he had to be ready to pass a test. Was his sermon helping to uplift the members of his congregation and the black race in general? If not, he was in for a serious rebuke.

"There was a critique of the programs of the church: Does this contribute to racial uplift?" said the Rev. David Daniels, a historian at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. "The church needed to have more than either a consoling role, a therapeutic role or inspirational role... What the church life was about had to contribute practically to people's lives and in the engagement of uplifting the race."

As blacks faced adjusting to life beyond slavery, enduring a ritualistic culture of lynching and racist terrorism, the black church was a shelter in often-stormy times. A century later, fighting social ills and instilling the overall empowerment of African Americans still proves a challenge for many religious leaders and is often at the top of the priority list, experts say.

The message must remain the same, scholars say

In his critically acclaimed book, "Race Matters," Harvard University professor and scholar, Cornel West, says the black church continues to be the bridge over troubled waters in the African-American community.

"At present, the major institutional bulwarks against the pervasive meaninglessness and despair in Afro-America are intermediate institutions such as Christian churches, Muslim mosques, and character-building schools," West writes. "They all are fighting an uphill battle ... Yet those intermediate institutions that affirm the humanity of black people, accent their capacities and potentialities, and foster the character and excellence requisite for productive citizenship, are beacons of hope in the midst of the cultural and moral crisis."

A century ago, churches banded together "to prevent lynching of our people," said Sherry DuPree, a Gainesville, Fla.-based author and researcher on African-American religious issues. "They knew if they didn't come together, they wouldn't survive."

This quest to "come together" and lead the community links the churches of the early 20th and 21st centuries. Throughout the past 100

years, the issues have not really changed much for African Americans. While others might see the new millennium in mystical apocalyptic terms, today's black church must continue to find ways to combat racism, educate children, spur economic development and feed the poor and disenfranchised. "It seems like it's more survival skills than worrying about what's going to happen in 2000," DuPree said.

Although spiritual development has always been the church's emphasis, economic and educational empowerment has often followed closely behind.

"I think the contemporary African-American church is recognizing that it is very much so an economic as well as a religious institution," said the Rev. Kenneth Henry, associate professor of church history at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta.

"Many black churches are beginning to realize that they do have clout with the numbers of persons immediately under their guidance and I think many of the churches are clearly entering into areas of providing housing and employment agencies and credit unions."

The Rev. James Shopshire,

professor of sociology of religion and urban ministry at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, said the black churches at the close of the 20th century still have far more to do on the economic development scene.

"Often we have not made the distinction between providing services and helping with economic development," he said. "We have not used our corporate and institutional power to make sure that we establish things that help the community grow and expand rather than give handouts to the community."

When the 20th century was at its midpoint and suburban "white flight" was the reaction to black migration to northern cities, many black churches stayed put amid the urban decay that followed.

"The liberal mainline churches were the abandoning churches, abandoning the inner urban core, leaving the cities," said Shopshire. "At the same time, many of the other churches, especially among African-American people, remained."

Drawing on the legacy of early 20th century black churches, which offered schools for children, literacy programs for adults and aid to migrants, many black "megachurches"—located both in the suburbs and the cities—have been offering vast educational opportunities to members and the community at large. There will be more of this in the new millennium. "They have their own school systems from K to 12," Daniels said. "Some of them are even starting college programs."

Shopshire said medium-sized and smaller churches also are contributing to the educational development of African-American children. Some of their schools operate from a desire to help children who "need to know our culture" in a multiracial world, he said.

One hundred years ago, the provision of services for African Americans was a necessity because the black church, which for the most part was solely Christian, was often the only pillar of the black community

President marks Black History Month

ASSOCIATED PRESS

President Clinton on Monday marked Black History Month by noting the 40th anniversary of the Greensboro, N.C. sit-ins that "galvanized young men and women of conscience across America" to push Jim Crow segregation into its grave.

Clinton said four freshmen from North Carolina A&T College actually performed a service to their country by sitting quietly at a whites-only lunch counter on Feb. 1, 1960. He said their action touched off dramatic sit-ins in nine states that wore down segregation in restaurants, theaters and concert halls, and led to a broader call for equality in housing, health care and education.

"The extraordinary bravery and determination of Ezell Blair Jr., Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil and David Richmond galvanized young men and women of conscience across America," Clinton said. "Their story of conscience and conviction and their ultimate triumph continue to inspire us today."

Clinton said all Americans should view Black History Month as a chance to "discover anew a treasure of stories about the triumph of the human spirit. ... These

stories are not only an important part of African American history, but an essential part of American history."

As he did last year, the president issued a proclamation declaring February as "National African American History Month," using the increasingly popular reference to black Americans. He set "Heritage and Horizons: The African American Legacy and the Challenges of the 21st Century" as the theme for this year's observances.

"It is a reminder that the new century on which we have just embarked offers us a unique opportunity to write our own chapter in the history of African Americans and of our nation," Clinton said. "We can teach our children that America's story has been written by men and women of every race and creed and ethnic background. We can ensure that our laws, our actions, and our words honor the rights and dignity of every human being."

The observance, honoring the contributions of black Americans, was started by historian Carter G. Woodson in 1926 as Negro History Week. It became Black History Week in the early 1970s, and expanded to a month in 1976.

AAMC AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN'S CLUB, INC.



Saturday, February 19, 2000

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