

Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Vision cont'd from pg 21

ister and educator Hiram Rhoades Revels and Henry McNeal Turner, shared similar profiles. Revels was a preacher who became America's first African American senator. Turner was appointed chaplain in the Union Army by President Abraham Lincoln.

To address the myriad problems and concerns of Blacks in this era, Black preachers discovered that congregations expected them not only to guide worship but also to be the community's lead informant in the public square.

The Cradle of King's Political and Spiritual Heritage

Many other events converged as well impacting black life that would later influence King's prophetic vision: President Woodrow Wilson declared entrance into World War I in 1914; as "boll weevils" ravaged crops in 1916 there was widespread agricultural depression; and then there was the rise of Jim Crow laws that were to legally enforce racial segregation until 1965.

Such tide-swelling events, in multiplier effect, ushered in the largest internal movement of people on American soil, the Great "Black" Migration. Between 1916 and 1918, an average of 500 southern migrants a day departed the South. More than 1.5 million relocated to northern communities between 1916 and 1940.

A watershed, the Great Migration brought about contrasting expectations concerning the mission and identity of the African

American church. The infrastructure of Northern Black churches were unprepared to deal with the migration's distressing effects. Its suddenness and size overwhelmed preexisting operations.

The immense suffering brought on by the Great Migration and the racial hatred they had escaped drove many clergy to reflect more deeply on the meaning of freedom and oppression. Black preachers refused to believe that the Christian gospel and discrimination were compatible.

However, Black preachers seldom modified their preaching strategies. Rather than establishing centers for Black self-improvement (e.g., job training, home economics classes and libraries), nearly all southern preachers who came North continued to offer priestly sermons that exalted the virtues of humility, good will and patience, as they had in the South.

Setting the Prophetic Tradition

Three clergy outliers - one a woman - initiated change. These three pastors were particularly inventive in the way they approached their preaching task.

Baptist pastor Adam C. Powell Sr., the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ) pastor Florence S. Randolph and the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) bishop Reverdy C. Ransom spoke to human tragedy, both in and out of the Black church. They brought a distinctive form of prophetic preaching that united spiritual transformation with social reform and confronted Black dehumanization.

Bishop Ransom's discontentment arose while preaching to

Chicago's "silk-stockings church" Bethel A.M.E. - the elite church - which had no desire to welcome the poor and jobless masses that came to the North. He left and began the Institutional Church and Social Settlement, which combined worship and social services.

Randolph and Powell synthesized their roles as preachers and social reformers. Randolph brought into her prophetic vision her tasks as preacher, missionary, organizer, suffragist and pastor. Powell became pastor at the historic Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. In that role, he led the congregation to establish a community house and nursing home to meet the political, religious and social needs of Blacks.

Shaping of King's Vision

The preaching tradition that these early clergy fashioned would have profound impact on King's moral and ethical vision.

They linked the vision of Jesus Christ as stated in the Bible of bringing good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind and proclaiming liberty to the captives, with the Hebrew prophet's mandate of speaking truth to power.

Similar to how they responded to the complex challenges brought on by the Great Migration of the early 20th century, King brought prophetic interpretation to brutal racism, Jim Crow segregation and poverty in the 1950s and '60s.

Through the prophetic preaching tradition, King brought people of every tribe, class and creed closer toward forming "God's beloved community" - an anchor of love and hope for humankind.

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-Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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