

# usc College

OF LETTERS, ARTS & SCIENCES

## College News

### Heirs to Wisdom

*USC and senior African-American clergy launch program aimed at the next generation of church leaders*

By Wayne Lewis  
July 2006

This June USC College launched a new program dedicated to passing on knowledge from senior African-American church leaders to the next generation of Los Angeles clergy and congregational leaders.

Passing the Mantle, supported by a grant from the James Irvine Foundation and administered by the College's Center for Religion and Civic Culture (CRCC), is an eight-session course to train a cohort of 30 black leaders in the basics of economic development, community organizing and church leadership.

Participants in this certificate program attend a series of seminars and public lectures, and receive one-on-one mentorship from senior clergy. The Rev. Cecil "Chip" Murray, holder of the Tansey Chair in Christian Ethics, directs the project. Firestone Professor of Religion Donald Miller, director of the School of Religion and executive director of the CRCC, serves as Passing the Mantle's principal investigator and is a member of its executive committee.

"This is important because the essence of the struggle for black equity is based in the black church," said Murray. "It was the first economic base, it's the first communication base, first educational base to this day. If you want to affect the larger black community, your point of contact will ultimately include the church."

Murray brought a wealth of leadership experience in the black church when he came to USC College in 2004, having retired after 27 years as pastor of the First African Methodist Episcopal Church. During his tenure, the congregation grew from 250 to more than 18,000. Through Passing the Mantle, Murray and USC will influence a new crop of ministers.

Murray has been assisted in developing the program by the Rev. Mark Whitlock, pastor of Christ Our Redeemer A.M.E. Church in Irvine, and the Rev. Eugene Williams, founder of Regional Congregations and Neighborhood Organizations, a nonprofit that works with black churches to provide services to their communities.

Passing the Mantle was originally Williams' and Miller's brainchild. In the wake of Murray's retirement, as well as the deaths of respected senior clergymen Thomas Kilgore and E.V. Hill, Williams anticipated a leadership void in the black church community.

"This network of civic-minded pastors was passing away, and there was no formal process for transferring their knowledge and skills," said Williams. "The people assuming leadership didn't have the same understanding as these senior pastors. So I said to Don, 'We've got to do something, and I'm wondering if Dr. Murray would be interested.'"

Williams and Murray agree the College is the perfect place to act as a conduit for knowledge between the generations. "The



Through an Irvine Foundation grant, the Rev. Cecil "Chip" Murray and Donald Miller of USC College's School of Religion have started the Passing the Mantle program, bringing the wisdom of senior African-American clergy to the church community's leaders of tomorrow.

*Photo credit: Matt Gainer*

CRCC has a long history of engaging with the religious community in California," said Williams, "and USC has a history of bringing leaders like Dr. Kilgore and Dr. Murray to campus."

"USC chooses to reach out to the community rather than run away," added Murray. "It's an ideal relationship. If this program doesn't work at USC, it can not and will not work anywhere."

The heart of Passing the Mantle is a series of seminars covering African-American church history; civic engagement by the black church; community and economic development; the theology of faith-based civic engagement; marketing the black church and modern technology; and leadership training. Almost half of seminar time will be devoted to the leadership training.

The technology and marketing element is particularly forward-looking. "We will deal with how to speak to the person who is pulled by cell phones, e-mail and text-messaging," said Whitlock. "We have the opportunity to reshape how we shake hands for the future."

Potential seminar-leaders include the Hon. Jan Perry of the Los Angeles City Council, the Rev. J. Alfred Smith of Oakland's Allen Temple Baptist Church, Ernesto J. Cortes Jr. of the Industrial Areas Foundation and Professor Raphael Bostic of the USC School of Policy, Planning, and Development.



The Rev. Eugene Williams, left, and the Rev. Mark Whitlock, right, assisted Murray in developing the Passing the Mantle program.

*Photo credit: Matt Gainer*

A public speaker series brings guests from the local and national lecture circuit to USC, with time allotted for program participants to interact informally with speakers. Passing the Mantle's mentorship component matches participants with veteran pastors for individual counsel regarding the challenges unique to each community.

The program fields fellows from all over the Los Angeles metropolitan area, with preference given to pastors of small and medium-sized congregations. Murray explained, "Ninety percent of American congregations number 200 or less, and half have 50 members or less. Mega-churches can do well on their own, but the 200-member churches have the desire to provide service to their communities, but don't necessarily have the resources. We'll show them how to take limitations and expand beyond them."

The current Irvine grant funds the program for two years, but the people behind Passing the Mantle hope to continue it beyond this initial period, and have their sights set on making an impact beyond USC and L.A.

Plans are in the works to produce a DVD and manual, so the project's curriculum can be disseminated to black churches nationally. Eventually Murray and his colleagues hope to share the knowledge with other ethnic and faith communities, such as Latino and Korean churches, mosques, and congregations outside the U.S.

Although the issues facing today's church are complicated, Murray is confident that Passing the Mantle will build a vital bridge between experienced clergy and the church leaders of tomorrow. Said Murray, "We need an extremely sophisticated pastor in the new generation. Passing the mantle on to them just means that somehow we'll finish the race."