

# Pain in the Pulpit

BY REV. EUGENE WILLIAMS

## Why many pastors of small to mid-size black churches do not engage in faith-based community organizing and public policy

A recent survey by The Public Influences of African-American Churches, a research initiative at Atlanta's Morehouse College, found that fewer than 25 percent of black clergy it surveyed said that their congregations have been directly involved in issues such as civil rights, affirmative action and welfare reform. At a time when the voice of black churches in public policy is needed most, why aren't more black churches engaged in public policy work?

Bishop John Hurst Adams of the African Methodist Episcopal Church suggests that black churches are operating essentially on the agenda given to them by their founders.<sup>1</sup> The first agenda of early black American congregations and then of emerging denominations included (1) the proclamation of the gospel, (2) benevolences, (3) education and, by the end of the 19th century, (4) foreign missions.

Dr. Lawrence N. Jones of Howard University observes that black churches have not developed effective centralized bureaucracies.<sup>1</sup> Do the observations of these distinguished African American theologians adequately explain the prob-

lem? Or is it possible that a more basic, fundamental problem exists within black churches: that there is pain in the pulpit?

Over the past two years, organizers affiliated with the Regional Congregations and Neighborhood Organizations Training Center have interviewed more than 2,000 black pastors in Southern California. Recently, the organizers participated in a reflection session to probe the reasons why many black pastors are reluctant to participate in faith-based community organizing and public policy work.

Their findings concluded that a vast majority of pastors in small to mid-size churches are experiencing a profound sense of pain in their personal lives. Church fights, economic pressures as well as personal and family challenges, are contributing to the pain. This article will attempt to illuminate some of the organizers' findings in the hope that it might be of service to those who are concerned about black churches engaging in public policy work.

### Church Fights and Lock-Outs

A fear of church fights and lock-outs is a major challenge facing pastors of

small to mid-size African American churches. A popular perception in contemporary society is that black pastors are dictatorial and non-democratic. However, unlike congregational churches in mainline Catholic and Protestant denominations, a majority of black churches are autonomous. Pastors of these churches serve at the pleasure of the local congregation. Participation in public policy initiatives involve taking risks. If a pastor leads a congregation into action on a policy initiative, and influential people within the congregation disagree with the initiative, the pastor can be voted out of the church.

Organizers reported that more than 60 percent of the pastors interviewed were either in the midst of a storm, coming out of one, or could see a storm on the horizon. A significant number of black churches in Southern California are transitioning from older pastors to younger ministers. Young clergy are finding it increasingly tough to shepherd their congregations in a new direction. Rev. E. Winford Bell, senior pastor of the Mt. Olive Second Missionary Baptist Church in Watts, is an exception. He successfully survived a church lock-out and is familiar with this dilemma.

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Rev. E. Winford Bell, senior pastor,  
Mt. Olive Second Missionary  
Baptist Church, Los Angeles

“When I was called to Mt. Olive Second nine years ago, I took over an older church with less than 60 members. Within a year, the church took in close to 300 new people. The old guard did not like the growth and manufactured reasons to lock me out.”

Pastor Bell survived the lock-out by engaging in an expensive court battle and a lot of prayer. “Many new preachers would not have survived what I did. They simply would not have rocked the boat or would have given up.” Today Mt. Olive Second is actively engaged in public policy formation and faith-based community organizing. “When I die, I want it to be said that I have done all I can do to better my fellow man. It won’t happen without public policy changes. The members of Mt. Olive Second understand this point and are now willingly embracing their prophetic call.”

### **WIFM and Narrow Self-Interest**

One senior organizer recalled a meeting he had with a pastor of a small to mid-size church. After a detailed presentation, the organizer extended an invitation to the pastor to join the organization. The pastor turned to the organizer and said, “Now explain the WIFM Doc.” The organizer was



puzzled and asked the pastor to explain what WIFM meant. The pastor replied, “WIFM means what’s in it for me.”

The organizer began to explain the benefits to the church for its participation in the organization. He also reiterated the implications of the policy initiative that the organization was addressing. Mid-way through the explanation, the pastor stopped the organizer and said, “You’re talking

about the church Doc and I am asking what is in it for me personally.”

The pastor’s response could be perceived as sad and self-serving. A closer examination might offer a different explanation. It is reasonable to expect that engaging in faith-based organizing and public policy work will provide direct benefits to local congregations. It is also reasonable for pastors to be concerned about their own livelihood. Most pastors of

*(Continued on page 13)*

# Pain in the Pulpit

(Continued from page 11)

small to mid-size churches are bivocational for financial reasons, or should be. They suffer great pain because their families are often asked to make great sacrifices for the sake of ministry.

It is unrealistic to expect pastors of a struggling church to take considerable risks without a clear understanding of the potential rewards. Faith-based organizing and public policy proponents have to meet this issue head on. Participation in public policy ministries may not provide direct benefits to the pastor. Participation must, however, clearly demonstrate the benefits to the members of the local congregation. Organizers must also be willing to assist local churches in building their programmatic capacity. Failure to do this limits the buy-in for many small to mid-size churches.

## The Need to be All-Knowing

Engaging in public policy initiatives requires clergy and lay leaders to place themselves in a position of being students. Very few black clergy come to the table with the skills and knowledge to understand the intricacies of public policy formation without assistance. There is a learning curve. This can be a painful experience for black pastors.

Black pastors often feel the need to be perceived as all-knowing in the eyes of their congregations. They tend to believe that the answer to every problem facing their membership can be found in the Bible. Lay people are accustomed to their pastor having an

answer for every problem they place before him or her. Some might argue that these assumptions are realistic. This writer believes that it is unrealistic to expect any pastor is equipped with all of the answers on any subject that arises.

In probing the validity of this observation, black pastors and congregants acknowledged this reality in private. There was also an acknowledgement that there is a real price to pay in many small to mid-sized black churches if a pastor stands before his or her congregation and says "I don't know the answer to this question."

## Isolation

Lorraine Hansberry, a great African American writer, once observed, "The thing that makes you exceptional, if you are at all, is inevitably that which must also make you lonely." Her observation perfectly describes many African American pastors in small to mid-size churches. A group of concerned clergy recently held a one-day conference on this subject. A number of issues were raised. Two stand out for the purpose of this article: (1) pastors are called upon to be there for their members during very stressful times, but there is often no one there for pastors when they experience stress and trauma, (2) there is no safe place for pastors to unpack the daily hurts and pains associated with ministry.

How can a pastor lead a congregation into battle on public policy issues when the pastor is also living in a constant state of pain and dysfunction?

For some, the pain can be used as a source of strength. For most pastors experiencing this pain, however, they are unlikely to take on extra responsibilities that can be perceived as outside the primary call of a preacher. Pain in the pulpit is a very real obstacle facing pastors of small to mid-sized churches. The key is to recognize it and consider it as a factor when raising the question of why more black pastors do not engage in faith-based community organizing and public policy work. ♦

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<sup>1</sup> "The Black Churches: A New Agenda," by Dr. Lawrence N. Jones, [www.religion-online.org/cgi-bin/researchd.dll/showarticle?item\\_id=1219](http://www.religion-online.org/cgi-bin/researchd.dll/showarticle?item_id=1219)

## For more information on the survey of black clergy, contact:

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Note: The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life provides an overview of the survey at <http://pewforum.org/news/index.php3?NewsID=324>.