

Power, Political Positioning and Petty Politics

by REV. EUGENE WILLIAMS III

The realities of public life vs. the petty politics of conventions and theological entertainment

African Americans appear to be losing power and influence in California in part because of demographic shifts. But African American churches can continue to project power beyond African American numbers if they initiate strategic alliances with new immigrants and other ethnic groups in order to protect the interests of low-income and working class Californians. Unfortunately, many African American clergy have been more interested in the petty politics of conventions, misinformed about the realities of public life and/or are pre-occupied with theological entertainment.

The Perceived and Real Loss of Power

The James Irvine Foundation recently completed demographic research to look at California's population growth patterns for the next 40 years. One of its findings concluded that the African American population in California will decrease from 7 to 6 percent.

For the first time in 40 years there is not an African American legislator in the state legislature from Northern California. There are only six African American legislators in the state legislature; 17 African American elected officials in Los Angeles County, one in San Diego County and no African American elected officials in San Bernardino and Riverside counties.

This predicament could erode the African American community's capacity to impact the legislative process. There is more power at stake than legislative power.

An informal survey of African American philanthropy foundation program officers drew a correlation between demographic shifts and a greater degree of difficulty in securing resources for viable African American organizations. Generally, surveyed black program officers feel undervalued and concerned about job security. According to one program officer, "We are being ignored

and undervalued. We are fighting harder for African American organizations seeking funding. In some cases, African American program officers opt for winning brownie points by demonstrating that they are unwilling to support African American groups when recommending organizations for funding."

Bellyaching is not in order. The sky is not falling. Things are never quite as bad as they seem. Undoubtedly though, it is time for African Americans to be more disciplined and creative in building and maintaining long-term social and political capital. African American nonprofit organizations must do a far better job of making their case with foundations and doing quality work. Issue-based initiatives rather than race-based electoral strategies are more appropriate now. And the African American faith community must lead the way.

Political Positioning

African Americans have one of the oldest sustained models of political struggle in the history of the United States. They have survived Jim Crow and the prison industrial complex. The black community has overcome literal, political and economic lynching. It has endured countless indignities. And this is not the first time

it has had to deal with the economic and political impact of new immigrants.

The Civil Rights Movement is a classic example of the impact that African American congregations can have on the economy and politics of the United States. The American wealth gap closed more during the civil rights period than at any other time in the country's history. The movement produced voting rights, public accommodations and an end to legal segregation. The past prepares the future.

California's problems and challenges require a greater contribution and measure of public participation from African



Illustration: Jonathan Clark, www.honahd.org

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American congregations. Mega-congregations will continue to play their traditional roles. Yet the most fertile opportunities for new and emerging strategies exist among small to mid-size black congregations. In fact, most Americans, regardless of race, worship in a house of faith that has less than 200 members. African Americans are typical in this regard.

Contributions Based on Authentic Experience

African Americans have rich, authentic experience that will continue to inform socioeconomic problem solving in California. Experiences in addressing prison reform, affordable housing, public health and voting rights uniquely qualify African Americans to participate and contribute. Similarly situated, Latino immigrants can take full advantage of the African American experience if African Americans share it with them.

In his recently released book, *The Presumed Alliance*, Nicolas C. Vaca suggests that demographic shifts may threaten African Americans. He writes, "On January 21, 2003, the U.S. Census Bureau officially announced that Latinos had surpassed African Americans as the largest minority group in the United States. This fact may be the hardest pill for African Americans to swallow even though the handwriting has been on the wall for some time now. Accepting this also means accepting the fact that it is now time to share center stage with another actor."

Certainly there are segments of the African American and Latino communities that view this change in demographics in zero sum terms. But several points must be considered: (1) Some African Americans thank God for the demographic shift, thinking that perhaps African Americans are no longer public enemy No. 1; (2) Latino communities are diverse. There is a world of cultural, social, economic and political difference between Florida Cubans, New York Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, Texas Mexicans, and so forth.

There is tremendous Latino diversity in California. For example, Chicanos do not automatically share the same views and interests on every issue with Mexican immigrants, much less the majority of Central American immigrants residing in South Central Los Angeles. There is enough evidence on the ground to demonstrate that this segment of the immigrant population is inadequately served by many traditional Latino organizations that profess a broad concern for The Latino Community. Some African American organizations in South Central Los Angeles serve as many Latinos from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica, Mexico and beyond than some Latino organizations that receive far more credit than they earn for their good work.

African American congregations are blessed and burdened by their civil rights experience. They are blessed to be the vanguard for devising inspired, innovative approaches to fighting oppression. They are sometimes burdened by the responsibility of holding up the diversity banner despite fighting battles on all sides. More

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traditional forces point public policy against African Americans. But most Americans benefit from African American struggles. Now, some minority theorists call for African Americans to move again to the back of the bus, so to speak, "because it is our turn." The new largest minority, whoever they are, will do well to compare notes with African Americans, to avail themselves of our experience and our wisdom. Latinos will soon shoulder a tremendous responsibility if they look forward to their new status as the largest American minority. African Americans

should be relieved "to share center stage with another actor."

Politic or Petty Politics

There is no longer an identifiable African American community in California. Consequently, traditional electoral strategies will become ineffective in the future. These strategies must be replaced by more broadly defined politics. Issue-based politics will substitute geographically based, ethnic-specific, partisan politics. The black church remains the most viable institution from which to launch policy initiatives, voter registration and education activities. Activating those black churches, though, is a daunting but essential task.

A majority of African American churches do not have judicatory structures. Consequently, conventions and associations dominate the landscape. These structures were originally places of fellowship and support. By default, though, conferences and associations became attractive to public decision-makers because of the pastors that frequented them. Decision-makers understood that if they wanted the black vote, they had to seek the support of the conferences and associations.

Today, most African American conventions and associations are far less ambitious and politically effective than in the past. Still, many black clergy practice petty politics to gain control over these insular, denominational structures. Politics more broadly defined had better replace the "ineffective and outdated" petty politics of conventions and associations.

Theological entertainment is another diversion for many African American clergy. Too many African American clergy and lay leaders allow themselves to be seduced by charismatic preacher-rock stars commanding as much as \$10,000 per performance. The intent is not to be disrespectful. Revivals and good preaching are essential elements of black faith.

However, this contemporary type of entertainment treats its audience as consumers. Rarely does it challenge the believer to engage in public life as a means of acting out their faith. This practice will eventually run its course. Some hope sooner rather than later.

No one is certain about the outcomes of the demographic shifts occurring in California. Speculation about the rise of some groups and the decline of others will continue. One thing is certain. African Americans will continue to be a significant contributor in the social and political future of California. They always have been and always will. ✚

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