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Why the Black Church is Vital for Healthy Communities

A Conversation with Pastor Cheryl Mitchell Gaines

Pastor Cheryl Mitchell Gaines, J.D, M.Div, is the founder and Senior Pastor of ReGeneration House of Praise, also known as the Church in the Field, in Southeast Washington, D.C.

Bombino: Can you describe the motivation, the starting point, for your ministry in Southeast DC?

Gaines: God led me to start the Church in the Field after I noticed a makeshift memorial that had been created by the community after the drive-by murders of four young people in Southeast. At the time I started the Church in the Field, people were scared. The fear was palpable. And the field itself needed restoration. There was so much trash that we used 50-pound garbage bags to pick up the trash. But God gave me a message to His besieged, betrayed, and beleaguered community. My vision for our church is to reach the least, the last, the lost and the NO LONGER left out with the message of salvation, deliverance, and hope that is found in Jesus Christ. Soon after starting the church, a young man told me: “Pastor, you approached me when I was unapproachable. You met me where I was at. I believe God is meeting me through you.”

Bombino: Is this something that is distinctive about the Black church?

Gaines: This has been and continues to be the heartbeat of the Black church—to be in the community, of the community, and approachable by all. The historic Black church believes in the parenthood of God and kinship of all people. We have been able to love our enemies, to do good to those who persecute us. But it is also, historically speaking, that the Black church has always known that God would make a way out of no way.

Even though we have always had limited resources, we have leveraged the volunteers who have emerged. These volunteers have come forward because they know that God is calling them, and they

also feel an institutional commitment to the Black church. Those who serve in the Black church serve out of a religious calling to act on their faith, to honor God. My church, decades ago, was baptizing people with HIV and AIDs before we knew for sure it wasn't transferred through water. And people in our church didn't hesitate. They would serve our brother or sister with AIDs or HIV just like any other brother or sister in the Lord.

That is the distinctive of the Black church. We have historically welcomed everyone, but we never hesitate to preach the word of God with respect to sin. And we know that God's grace is sufficient for all sinners. So welcoming all but speaking the truth of our sacred beliefs has never been a contradiction. For us, God's welcoming grace is sufficient to draw us all to the altar, to repentance. The orthodox Black church still does preach the unadulterated word of God, and unapologetically so. What I will say is that the Black church has not dealt with all sin equally across the board, so some groups have felt singled out.

Bombino: There are some fascinating studies that show that historically Black congregations have a positive economic and social impact on their surrounding communities. In 2001, University of Pennsylvania scholars Ram Cnaan and Stephanie Boddie published a [study](#) called "Black Church Outreach: Comparing How Black and Other Congregations Serve Their Needy Neighbors." This research concluded that in Philadelphia, Black houses of worship provided more social programs to their local communities than other congregations, especially health care, early childhood education, and programs for at-risk youth. Black churches, as compared to White, Hispanic and Asian, offered more outreach and civic programs, according to an article summarizing the study, "such as business clubs and affirmative-action programs. Black congregations are also more likely to collaborate with other religious groups in social-service programs." Cnaan's research also showed that a majority of the congregations in urban Philadelphia were African American. Among the congregations in Philadelphia, nine out of ten provide services to their community. Cnaan estimates that the services provided by these congregations would cost the government a quarter of a billion dollars to replicate. What is especially interesting about this research is that while the Black congregations did more in their community, they had demonstrably less in terms of financial resources. Can you help shed light on that?

Gaines: The Black church and Black people have understood that our Creator is the God who brought us out of oppression. Scarcity and oppression are nothing new to the Black church, and they are not only conditions of the past. Because our people and our church still face oppression and adversity today, our reliance on God is essential. We know God as a relational God who makes something out of nothing, and who expects His children to do the same.

Because God has a heart for us, and we are created in the image of God, having a heart for God really means having a heart for all of God's people. This means being in and of community, and being people of hope. We believe what God has done for others, He can do for you and me. He is the source. No one but God can bring about redemption for communities.

Bombino: Can you discuss your previous professional roles and how they relate to navigating partnerships between faith communities and government?

Gaines: In seminary, God began to open doors and use me as a liaison between the church and the state and this has been a consistent theme throughout my vocational life. I have been blessed to help build bridges between these two institutions (faith groups and government/secular institutions) that need to work together to heal communities.

Years ago, I was hired to be a coordinator with a child and family project for a university. The principal investigator in this social science research project focused on parent-child relationships in middle-class Black families. She wanted to recruit Black families and she knew the church was the nucleus of their lives. The study became longitudinal and we had a 95 percent retention rate after two years among participants. We had recruited families from within the Black church, people who had faith and took their commitments seriously and recognized the value of the research on family stability within their communities.

Beyond the success of this research was the personal impact it had. The principal investigator in this study, a Jewish woman, wanted to understand the communities she was studying better. She came for a service to the Black church where the families had been recruited, and she was moved through witnessing their experience in the Black church.

After seminary in New York state, I first worked as a chaplain for two juvenile justice facilities, and then the Commissioner saw me and brought me out of the chaplaincy to be a regional liaison between the government and Black faith community. We did a lot of training on topics relevant to the strengthening of healthy families, such as the reduction of child abuse and neglect. We knew that taking this message and training to the Black church would enable us to reach Black families. The government knew the Black church was an invaluable partner in both better understanding Black families and in improving the quality of life for these families.

In my time in New York, I was a Democrat appointed to a state's liaison role by a Republican governor. I was asked to change my party and I was told that my County Executive wouldn't hire me because I was a Democrat, but I refused to change my party affiliation for a job, and I got it. **That's the essential distinctive of the Black church: utter reliance on God and recognition of the source of our blessings.** God got me that job.

After seminary, in my role as an attorney, I was designated to represent mothers and fathers who were accused of abuse or neglect. This created an internal struggle for me. I had spent my life as a children's advocate, and now I was faced with representing the parents who had often done horrible and neglectful things to their own children. Once, I had to represent a sex offender. I begged God to show me what to do. I expressed to God my disgust at my own client. But God simply said to me:

“That’s my child too.” Even the most offensive offenders are children of God, and need His love and salvation. God showed me that this client was His child.

As Howard Thurman said: “The contradictions of life are never final.” And God lives in those contradictions. That is something the Black church has understood from the beginning: We are free while we are oppressed. We are called holy and beloved while we are still sinners. Only God can live in the space of contradiction, and make a way for us.

Bombino: Can you describe your experiences as a government contractor working with Black ministries here in DC?

Gaines: Once I moved to the DC area, I was hired for work with a federal contractor, McFarland & Associates, during the administration of George W. Bush. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Association (SAMHSA) had provided faith-based federal funds to address three major priorities: prisoner reentry, HIV/AIDs, and substance abuse prevention. In the Bush administration, the federal government really recognized the vital role of the faith community in addressing these systemic challenges. In the contract I worked on, we gave sub grants to smaller churches and faith-based community groups that were grass roots and on the ground doing the work. Our role as the primary contractor was to provide infrastructure, fiscal, and technical support to these place-based groups providing the direct services.

Many of these churches and community organizations could provide the best services because they knew the needs of the community best and had the community’s trust. And yet, many of these groups didn’t know how to navigate the technical world of the Federal Acquisitions Regulations. That is where we came in: we provided back-end support, financial accountability, training and technical assistance, as well as oversight and some quality assurance, thus freeing up smaller organizations from the hassles of back-end operations so they can do what they do best—serve.

Bombino: What would it look like if the federal government really started recognizing the impact and potential of these smaller faith-based and community-based groups to serve their communities best?

Gaines: It would look like larger institutions not always getting all of the government’s money. The government, including this administration, has made comments about the value of churches, local groups, and the Black church in particular. But real impact is measured by whether the government puts money into these groups that it claims to prioritize.

We would love to see this administration revitalize the federal faith-based initiative and fully fund its various components in various agencies. The president could deliberately and intentionally connect more with Black churches to understand the ways in which these unique faith groups are cultivating healthy communities, and to figure out how government can support this work. You see, you never

reach people through rules and regulations; it is always through relationships. And that is where the Black church shines.

Bombino: What do you think the Black church can do to make this vision happen?

Gaines: We as a church need to make this happen. We need to make our voices heard. I don't think we should stay silent. Meet with your congress people. Demand accountability by these leaders to the Black church. Vote. Run for office. Understand the impact of policies on the church and the ability of the church to live out its faith and commitment to God. Political engagement is just an extension of living out your faith.

Bombino: What do you think that White Christians and predominantly White faith communities can do?

Gaines: I do believe the biggest, largely silent problem in the Christian community is issues of race. White people take for granted that we are all created equal. This is true, but inherent human dignity is different than access to opportunity, to resources, to power. This access is still not equal in society. And it disproportionately impacts Black communities, Black families, the Black church. There is a certain tone-deafness towards racism among White Christians. There is a lack of recognition that racism still exists, on an individual level and on an institutional level. Black Christians don't feel like their reality is acknowledged by their White brothers and sisters. Cultural interpretation needs to happen. But this can happen. We can move from theory to practice. The Black church, out of necessity, already has. **After all, there is no theory in the hood, dear, only practice.**

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