

Black Pastors Split on Moral Agenda

Two Atlanta ministers hope to unite clergy who disagree on which issues should take priority

An Atlanta pastor and the daughter of a slain civil rights leader are seeking to build bridges between black ministers who have expressed divergent views on the overall agenda for black America and how vocal African-American clergy should be in opposition to gay marriage.

Bishop Eddie Long, senior pastor of New Birth Baptist Church, and the Rev. Bernice King, daughter of Martin Luther King Jr. and a member of New Birth, are taking active steps to build open communication in the black church. In April the pair hosted the first Kingdom Summit, a closed-door, invitation-only meeting aimed at fostering honest dialogue between veteran, civil-rights-era pastors and prominent charismatic ministers in hopes of bringing unity between the two groups. A second meeting was to be held in May.

Long declined to name the summit participants in hopes of keeping the dialogue confidential. Since the November presidential election, there has been increased public disagreement among black religious and civic leaders about which issues are most critical to the African-American community.

Some younger leaders—the majority of whom are charismatic or Pentecostal—have expressed opposition to gay marriage, many supporting a constitutional amendment banning same-sex unions. Other veteran, mostly mainline clergy say arguing about amending the Constitution draws attention away from more

pressing moral issues, such as ending the Iraq war and creating a more equitable health-care system.

In January the four oldest black Baptist denominations—the National Baptist Convention USA Inc., the Progressive National Baptist Convention, the National Missionary Baptist Convention of America and the National Baptist Convention of America—held a first-ever joint meeting in Nashville, Tenn. Though they expressed opposition to gay marriage, they said ending the Iraq war, reforming President Bush's education plan and calling for more funding to fight AIDS in Africa and the Caribbean were more urgent concerns.

Days later, the newly formed High Impact Leadership Coalition unveiled its Black Contract With America on Moral Values, which expresses support for a federal marriage amendment alongside calls for education, health-care and prison reform, and small-business development.

Affiliated with the conservative Traditional Values Coalition, the group is hosting a series of summits aimed at mobilizing black clergy to support a ban on same-sex marriage. The first was held in January at Crenshaw Christian Center in Los Angeles. A second was held at The King's College in New York in April.

The Rev. Eugene F. Rivers III of Azusa Christian Community in Boston said the divergent views represent a larger trend in which Pentecostals and charismatics are emerging as the dominant political force in the black church.

"We're coming to the end of an intellectual age," said Rivers, who supports an amendment banning gay marriage and plans to

announce his own document, God's Gift: A Christian Vision of Marriage and the Black Family, during a Washington, D.C., press conference this month.

"The paleo-liberal civil rights industry leadership has come to an end," he said. "They no longer have political, moral or intellectual traction. Rev. Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton are good men who represent a philosophically and intellectually exhausted political paradigm."

Though he represents the emerging leadership, Long hopes his summits will help build a bridge. He said honest dialogue could benefit everyone involved. "That's a good thing because now we're stirring each other to search the Scriptures and to really dig into why they believe what they believe," he said.

In December Long and King led a march in downtown Atlanta to advance a moral agenda for the nation. Media coverage targeted their opposition to gay marriage, but Long said his purpose for the march was to mobilize the church.

"The church has been silent for so long and not really giving a clear voice in the community about what we stand for and why we stand for it," he said. "So often we stay in our sanctuaries and ... never really [get] out in the main conversation of what [is] really going on in the world, and we become irrelevant."

Neither Long nor King supports a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage. They say changing the Constitution should rarely be done and that other legal remedies exist to ensure gay marriage is not legalized.

Though Coretta Scott King has been an advocate for gay and lesbian rights, Bernice King said her mother also does not support same-sex marriage. "Her view has been twisted by the majority media," King said. "My mother does not believe in same-sex marriage. However, she is very concerned and is an advocate for preserving the Constitution and not tampering with it."

Long said he and Coretta Scott King communicate regularly, adding that she, Bernice King and Martin Luther King III visited New Birth for a prayer meeting in 2002. "They laid hands on me in reference to moving forward in that which her husband had started," Long said.

Since then, Long has appeared more outspoken on sociopolitical matters. He said the December march was a means of issuing a challenge to African-American Christians. "When we put the call out, they were able to break camp from their groups, break camp from their associations because they knew in their spirits it was God calling them to this move," he said. "I believe it is a time now that people are drawing a line and God is saying 'choose this day who you're going to serve.' At least you have to come out and say something."

The Republican Party has made strides in wooing black voters, with President Bush getting 2 percent more of the black vote in 2004 than he did in 2000. But King says neither party truly connects with the black church or the church in general.

"Because you take a biblically based stance does not mean you are necessarily Republican; that's the tragedy of our times," King said. "At the end of the day, morality is not just confined to homosexuality and abortion. The Republican Party has been able to hone in on these two things and get the

support of those in churches across America.”

King said a pastor from New Zealand has begun an alternative political party in his country. “I believe this is something we need to look at in the body of Christ in America,” she said. “Honestly, there are truths that come out of both parties.”

Long said there will always be people who choose homosexuality, but he believes a nation cannot avoid consequences when it promotes this lifestyle. “History has proven that that route will destroy a nation,” he said. “The issue really grabs us at our foundation of being in the very image of Christ.”

Long said he knows there are practicing homosexuals in his and other churches. Many are coming to church because they don’t want to remain in the lifestyle, he said, but even if they don’t change their ways his message to them centers on God’s love, not man’s hate.

Richard Daigle in Atlanta