

Revive Us, Precious Lord

A new Pentecostal fervor is stirring in America's black mainline churches. Leaders of this movement say the Holy Spirit is breaking centuries-old traditions.

Bethel AME Church in Baltimore is nearly as old as the black church itself. Organized in the late 1700s by a group of freed slaves, Bethel was among the founding members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which in 1816 became the first historically black denomination.

Yet when you peek inside Bethel's sanctuary today, you will find only superficial remains of tradition: Wooden pews and stained-glass windows nestled high in the balcony. In the last 20 years, the 15,000-member congregation has experienced what some may call a power surge, taking on a Pentecostal orientation and embracing such charismatic gifts as speaking in tongues, healing, miracles and being slain in the Spirit.

"Pentecost does not belong to any one denomination," says the Rev. Frank M. Reid, who has been Bethel's pastor since 1988. "It is part of every Christian's journey. ... Every Christian must have a Pentecostal experience—must!—there's no way around it."

Bethel's awakening is part of a larger turn among mainline black churches toward what has been called "neo-Pentecostalism," a movement that is believed to be influencing at least a third of black mainline Christians—or roughly 5 million people. Its spread mirrors the growth of Pentecostalism worldwide.

In his recent book *The Next Christendom*, Philip Jenkins, a

historian and religion professor at Pennsylvania State University, writes that Christianity's spread "southward" in Latin America, Africa and Asia has sparked a full-scale Reformation. By 2050, he predicts, only one in five of the world's Christians will be white, non-Latino. He notes that the growth is most rapid among Pentecostals.

"Though Pentecostalism emerged as a movement only at the start of the twentieth century, chiefly in North America, Pentecostals today are at least 400 million strong, and heavily concentrated in the global South," Jenkins wrote in *The Atlantic Monthly*. "By 2040 or so there could be as many as a billion, at which point Pentecostal Christians alone will far outnumber the world's Buddhists and will enjoy roughly numerical parity with the world's Hindus."

Historian Vinson Synan, dean of the Regent University Divinity School, notes Pentecostalism's fastest growth in the United States is among independent charismatic churches and black neo-Pentecostals. He says worship styles of Pentecostals and African Americans have long been similar.

That fact may be a significant contributor to neo-Pentecostalism's spread, adds Cheryl Townsend-Gilkes, a professor at Colby College and an authority on African American religious studies. Gilkes says neo-Pentecostalism, a term she eschews, is simply a revitalization of black traditional worship, which has always been more experiential than traditional white churches, but was rejected for a time by the better-educated black middle class.

Neo-Pentecostalism has been an important bridge for middle class African Americans, says sociologist Lawrence H. Mamiya, who coined the term neo-Pentecostal in his 1989 book, *The*

Black Church in the African American Experience, which he co-authored with the late scholar C. Eric Lincoln. Neo-Pentecostal ministers are largely seminary-trained. And neo-Pentecostal churches stress social activism, which some argue is a detour from traditional black Pentecostal churches' response to sociopolitical issues.

Today, Mamiya says, neo-Pentecostalism is the fastest-growing segment of Christianity among the black middle class, and by 2050 he predicts that half of all black Christians will have embraced some form of Pentecostalism. If neo-Pentecostals continue to combine their deep emphasis on the Holy Spirit with a call to social action, he says, "they can revive the black church."

Black Pride and God's Power

Some suggest that the black church has never been short on vitality. "I don't think [the black church] ever lost its life," says the Rev. Gardner C. Taylor, a veteran civil rights hero who is considered the nation's best African American preacher. "I just think the new music and all that goes with [neo-Pentecostalism] has increased the interest of some people. But I've never known the church to be suffering for life."

When neo-Pentecostalism emerged in the late 1960s, in a post-civil rights America, the black church was caught at a crossroads, says Robert M. Franklin, Ph.D., a visiting professor at Harvard Divinity School and president emeritus of Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta. Pastors were wrestling with whether to continue their strong sociopolitical witness or to turn toward shepherding souls.

“Neo-Pentecostalism was a bridge,” Franklin says. “It encouraged people to work in society to build justice, but taught that in order to do that, you had to have a strong spiritual life.”

It was around this time that a 20-something minister named John R. Bryant took over the pastorate of St. Paul AME Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Several years before, while on a Peace Corps mission in Africa, Bryant encountered a spiritual realm he had never known. People were healed, went into trances and exercised spiritual power—all “without the notion of Jehovah God or Jesus Christ.”

The experience led him to re-examine the Scriptures, focusing on what they said about the spiritual dimension. “That for me became my awakening,” he says, “that in Jesus Christ everything the Bible said could be accomplished.”

Now considered the father of neo-Pentecostalism, Bryant came to view the Holy Spirit as the power base of Christian theology. “That’s where the can-do of the faith kicks in—through the power of the Holy Spirit,” he told Charisma.

At St. Paul AME, Bryant began fusing his Pentecostal beliefs with an emphasis on black pride. Sporting an Afro and wearing a dashiki, Bryant began teaching his young, intellectual congregation that Pentecostalism was a reintegration of their cultural roots, and that the Holy Spirit could liberate and empower them. His message was affirmed with “right ons” instead of amens, and whistling instead of hallelujahs.

Bryant’s strong cultural affirmation, coupled with the fact that he earned a master’s degree from Boston University and

was pursuing a doctorate at Harvard, “affirmed for many black people that it was OK to explore the Spirit. This was not ignorance,” he says.

This new message attracted people who would later lead major ministries, such as the Rev. Floyd H. Flake, who pastors 11,000-member Allen Cathedral AME Church in New York; the Rev. Grainger Browning, who leads 10,000-member Ebenezer AME Church in Maryland; and Reid, who earned a doctorate from Harvard instead of Yale solely to attend Bryant’s church.

“I saw that church overflowing with young people, with all their issues, believing that the answers to their issues and problems could be found within the church,” Flake says.

Similar theological shifts were evident among Baptists, who account for nearly half of all African American Christians. Rather than focusing on black pride, however, pastors such as Roy Brown of what is now Pilgrim Assemblies International in New York and Bishop Paul S. Morton Sr. of Greater St. Stephen Full Gospel Baptist Church in New Orleans argued that embracing Pentecost was part of accepting the full gospel of Christ.

Baptists largely opposed the move, and Morton, who was raised in the Church of God in Christ, eventually founded the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship (FGBCF) in 1993. “We’ve tried to bridge the divide [between traditional and charismatic ministry], to kind of let people know it’s not too bad on this side ... I think we’re moving into an era when people are less hostile toward Pentecostalism.”

Ministers such as Eddie L. Long of 25,000-member New Birth

Cathedral in Atlanta; Kenneth C. Ulmer of 8,000-member Faithful Central Bible Church in Inglewood, California; and Larry D. Trotter of 5,000-member Sweet Holy Spirit Full Gospel Baptist Church in Chicago became bishops within the FGBCF as they transitioned from traditional Baptists to “Bapticostals.” Long and Ulmer are now both independent.

Power and Politics

Theological shifts and historical paradigms aside, what has people talking about this movement is the sheer size of the congregations. Typically, mainline churches have mushroomed from several hundred to several thousand within a couple of years of embracing neo-Pentecostal tenets, making them among the largest in their denominations.

Perhaps most striking is that of the nation’s black megachurches, a majority are believed to be neo-Pentecostal, giving these leaders unprecedented influence in the African American community.

But the exposure has not come without a cost. Neo-Pentecostal and black megachurch pastors in general have been criticized for not continuing the black pastor’s historic role of challenging political and social systems that keep people poor and oppressed. Most neo-Pentecostal ministers do not organize civil rights marches or publicly attempt to sway elections.

The ideological battling was evident in January when President Bush visited 6,000-member First Baptist Church of Glenarden (Maryland) for a service honoring Martin Luther King Jr. Popular African American radio personalities criticized First Baptist pastor John K. Jenkins Sr., who is neo-Pentecostal,

for not using the opportunity to chide the president for his opposition to affirmative action, which Bush announced days before his visit.

Though Jenkins supports affirmative action and says he spoke privately with the president about the issue before the service, he says it would have been inappropriate for him to use his pulpit to condemn the president. "I didn't feel it was my place to turn that worship service into a political rally," Jenkins told Charisma.

Rather than challenging systems, many black megachurches such as Jenkins' fund extensive community development initiatives that include private schools, health services, senior citizens centers and credit unions. Several have built affordable housing to cultivate home ownership, and many teach entrepreneurship and business development.

First AME in Los Angeles offers small-business loans and has had corporate executives such as Walt Disney head Michael Eisner lead workshops on business development. New Birth Cathedral in Atlanta has hosted Rich Dad, Poor Dad author Robert T. Kiyosaki to conduct seminars on wealth-building. And Brentwood Baptist Church in Houston opened a McDonald's franchise to create jobs in their community.

"My assignment is to preach good news to the poor," Reid says. "What is the good news to the poor? You don't have to stay poor. Get the anointing and God will equip you with discipline and will so you can move from poverty to prosperity—not billionairehip, not millionairehip, but you will have more than enough to meet the needs of your family."

Veteran ministers, many of whom marched with Martin Luther King, see this as a gospel of health and prosperity, and a compromise of biblical truth.

"If the emphasis becomes a message of prosperity, then it is alien to the gospel," says Taylor, pastor emeritus of Concord Baptist Church in New York. "For the gospel has at its heart a cross, which is the ultimate sacrifice. ...

"In the Protestant tradition the idea came to be that if one is industrious and faithful to service of God, one will prosper. But not necessarily so. Our Lord Christ was faithful to His Father and faithful to truth, and suffered. I think there's always the promise in the Christian gospel of deliverance beyond suffering, but to eliminate the element of suffering is alien to Christianity."

Morton contends that suffering accompanies the process of sanctification, as believers attempt to throw off the entanglements of the world. But in a time when African Americans are moving into the middle class in record numbers, a "poor mouthing" church is a turnoff, he says.

Bryant, however, notes that the black underclass is growing as well, and he sees too many large black churches directing their resources to reach the middle class instead of the poor. "In my father's generation, the church was the voice of that underclass," he says. "... So many of them have given up on the inner-city young people."

Though he admits that not all have fallen short, Franklin says many black megachurches have had an "almost overwhelming preoccupation with building sacred space" instead of using

their resources to impact the HIV/AIDS crisis, for example, or to improve “the decrepit public school system that our kids are dependent on.”

The perceived lack of civic involvement is often blamed on black megachurches’ Pentecostal leanings. Many have argued that even during civil rights, black Pentecostals focused “heavenward” instead of addressing the challenges facing their communities. That criticism is what led Brentwood Baptist pastor Joe Samuel Ratliff out of the United Holy Church of America, which ordained him, and into the Baptist tradition. “My spirit just did not resonate with much of where they were in terms of social and ethical gospel,” says Ratliff, who does not consider his church neo-Pentecostal.

For Flake, a former Democratic congressman from New York who has led his congregation to do \$100 million worth of community development, the debate is mostly about a rebalance of power. “There has been a dispersal of the models of [African American] leadership so that it is not just elected officials,” he says. “It is also this body of black clergy ... and those who have now evolved into ... corporate America.

“I think the people most frightened by this are those who built their reputations on social and political leadership and are trying to hold on to a model that, quite frankly, is still necessary but is part of a different kind of component.”

Where Is the Power?

So what happens to the black church as the nation grows more diverse? With Latinos now the largest minority group in America, African American pastors say their role is evolving.

“Our ultimate survival is going to be dependent on our ability to embrace not only Latinos, but to even embrace a larger portion of the white population than we may have in the past,” Flake says.

Visions of developing multicultural ministries are not new among African American ministers, but most say nonblacks have been reluctant to attend—and remain—in their churches. Though there are numerous multiethnic churches with white pastors, the opposite is less common. Many pastors say that is a reflection of the subtle racism that still exists in America. Reid believes the racism that remains also is fed by limitations black pastors place on themselves.

“The focus on the least, the left out and the oppressed is essential,” he says. “It’s part of the gospel. But when ... you only talk about the issues that affect the poor ... and you do not address the needs of the corporate executive, of the seventh generation college student, of the multimillionaire who ... may be spiritually poor, then those people don’t think they have a place in your ministry. ...

“When we limit the kingdom, then we limit the access that people have whose experiences are broader and wider, not just culturally, but class-wise as well.”

Reid notes that the AME Church began because a white Methodist Episcopal church would not allow Richard Allen and Absalom Jones to pray with the white members. They started the AME Church “not as a racial denomination,” he says, but as a place where all people would be welcome.

Now, 30 years on, Reid wonders aloud what has happened to the

Pentecostal power charismatics have for so long preached about. The week he spoke with Charisma, an 8-year-old Baltimore girl had her throat slashed allegedly by her mother's boyfriend, and a 15-year-old was found starved to death and beaten by her caretakers.

"Why are we not able to translate our powerful preaching and worship in the West into the reality of what goes on in the street?" he asks. "When you go to Africa, when you go to Seoul, Korea ... you see them struggling to manifest the reality of the Holy Spirit in their community, and it's not happening here in America as it should."

Most neo-Pentecostal leaders support their denominations. Reid applauds the AME Church's historic commitment to social activism. Morton says he'd never want Baptists to lose the strength of their teaching on the foundational truths of the gospel.

But ultimately the challenge is not whether churches will choose to identify with the neo-Pentecostal "new" or the traditional "old," but whether the Christian community will become spiritually mature enough to handle new things God is doing—new levels of influence in, say, business, media or government.

"The issue is, will we choose life or death," Reid says. "If we choose life, there will be revival in America, and you will see the first 100,000-member church in America. But if we do not choose the Holy Spirit-inhabited life, then you will see things get worse for America and not better, and you will see this neo-Pentecostal fad was, in fact, a passing phenomenon."

He adds: "We don't need another phenomenon. We need a movement of God."

A Church For a New Generation

Baltimore pastor Jamal-Harrison Bryant is making church relevant to the hip-hop generation.

Anyone who can get the hip-hop generation coming to church—and make them glad to be there—will get people talking. So when Empowerment Temple AME Church in Baltimore grew from 42 members to 6,000 in less than three years, heads turned. Most of the people in the pews were younger than 40.

The pastor behind this unusual trend is Jamal-Harrison Bryant, 31. He chalks up his success to God's favor—and the fact that he feels called to reach "18- to 42-year-old children of the Diaspora"—African American Gen-Xers, many of whom are disenchanted with both civil rights politics and the church.

Bryant had some practice as head of the youth and college division of the NAACP before starting the church in 2000. But he says transparency has been key. "I had to be vulnerable enough to expose myself," he told Charisma. "That here I am as your pastor who loves the Lord who can tell you forthrightly that I failed out of high school, that I parented out of wedlock. So I feel what you feel; I identify with what you identify with."

Every Sunday, 65 to 100 people join the church, with at least 60 percent of them new converts. The other 40 percent have been out of church for 12 to 18 months. "What's drawing people is not that I'm an AME church, but that there's an anointing

in the church," he says.

Bryant has dealt straightforwardly with tough issues of sexuality, including masturbation, pornography and homosexuality, and has even given an altar call for people who were selling drugs.

"The place exploded," his father, Bishop John Bryant, recalls. "To know that they are present in our churches. The preacher has to be able to know that's there. You aren't going to do that if you don't know what's going on in your community."

Younger African Americans run the gamut from being involved in drugs to being college-educated with "money but no peace, positions but no power," Bryant says. Many are attending black megachurches because of the services offered them. "The church is reinstitutionalizing family values," he says, teaching people parenting skills, investment and business strategies, and offering anger management or relationship counseling.

Empowerment Temple is developing a chain of gas stations, and building a school that will serve students K-12 during the day and house adult courses in the evenings. In the future, there will be Power Centers throughout the city with credit unions, job placement services, and rehabilitation for addicts. When a person joins the church, they register to vote at the same time.

The AME is watching Bryant's success. "I have more to add by being a part. The AME Church embraces the Holy Spirit, the gifts of the Holy Spirit," Bryant says. "I think my presence in African Methodism is to help change, transform and elevate the denomination to a place of charismatic worship."

WOMEN IN MINISTRY

Your Daughters Shall Prophecy

Neo-Pentecostal women ministers are emerging with an unprecedented boldness—and they are treading uncharted territory alongside men in the church.

Suzan Johnson Cook didn't realize she had made history until she opened An Encyclopedia of African American Christian Heritage and saw her face.

Pastor of 475-member Bronx Christian Fellowship in New York, Cook was the first woman elected senior pastor of an American Baptist congregation and the first woman named chaplain of the New York City Police Department. But what landed her in the history books was her election as the first woman president of the Harlem Ministers Conference, the nation's largest gathering of African American clergy.

"You don't try to make history," she says. "You just do what you're called to do with passion."

Now touring the country as part of Bishop T.D. Jakes' God's Leading Lady conference, Cook says blazing a trail for women in ministry hasn't been a crystal stair, quoting poet Langston Hughes. But it has been worth it, especially now that she sees so many women following in her steps.

The Association of Theological Schools reports that the number of women in seminary has grown steadily since the 1970s, with

women now making up 35 percent of seminary students. The progress among African American women—who are making historic advances in all spheres of life, frequently outpacing their male counterparts—is most evident within mainline denominations, where women are being ordained and appointed as senior pastors.

Within classical Pentecostal ranks, women such as Bishop Ernestine Reems and Bishop Marva Mitchell have had to leave their denominations in order to hold senior leadership roles. The increasing visibility of women such as Bishop Vashti McKenzie, the first woman elected a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), and Millicent Hunter, pastor of 3,000-member Baptist Worship Center in Philadelphia, may put pressure on classical black Pentecostal groups to reassess their views on women in ministry, says David Daniels, an associate professor of church history at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago.

Neo-Pentecostalism among mainline black churches is creating a new circuit for Pentecostal women preachers such as Claudette Copeland and Suzie Owens, because many of the denominations, particularly the AME and AME Zion denominations, affirm women ministers.

“That’s a move that God has sanctioned, and it will not be denied,” says AME Bishop John Bryant, who was McKenzie’s pastor when she began sensing the call to ministry. “I’m watching more and more men being open to their wives in ministry. Proverbs says your gift will make room for you, and as women are given opportunities, they shine.”

Noted leaders such as Bishop Paul Morton of the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship and the Rev. Gardner C. Taylor say

their opinions about women in ministry have changed as they observed an authenticity in the ministries of women. "I have no right, nor do I think anybody else has the right, to put limitations on what God can and cannot do," Taylor says. "I think that is presumptuous."

Though women ministers have existed as long as the church, the current generation is emerging with more boldness. "They are coming out of the woodwork with an 'I don't care what you think; this is what God called me to do' type of attitude," says Hunter, who mentors women ministers through her National Association of Women Clergy. "In 1986, they were less inclined to stir the pot. ... Now there are role models."

Several of the women ministers embrace what they call a liberation theology. "The [theological] problem most have is, we view women from the garden and not the cross, the resurrection and Pentecost" McKenzie says. "The rules for inclusion changed [after the cross]. We are neither Greek nor Jew, bond nor free, male nor female."

For Hunter, the proof is in the pudding. "If God does not approve of what He's doing through me, we have to look at, by what power is this happening?" she asks. "By what power are souls being saved by the thousands? ... The anointing speaks for itself."

Because of the efforts of women theologians and trailblazing women ministers, more women are expected to emerge in ministry, bringing their unique gifts of nurturing and multitasking to the table. McKenzie says her unique style of ministry is needed in her jurisdiction of southern Africa, where she oversees more than 250 churches across four nations. In a region where 17,000 people die daily of AIDS and one in

three 18- to 34-year-olds is HIV-positive, she says seeing a woman in leadership helps dispel cultural myths that keep women “on the lowest rung of the social and cultural ladder.”

Many observers say the momentum isn't slowing. “My projection is that you will have more women in major national pulpits in the next 10 years,” Cook says. “Part of what we're doing now in the trailblazing, pioneering generation is trying to help be consistent in our ministries so the possibilities will [be greater] for the women who follow us.”

Adrienne S. Gaines

Adrienne S. Gaines is news editor for Charisma. Someday she hopes to attend seminary and enter the ministry.