

African-American Churches Unite to Address Needs of Black Males

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✖ For the first time in 45 years, the nation's leading black Methodist denominations are uniting to address problems facing African-American males during a summit called the Great Gathering, which began Monday and runs through Wednesday.

With a combined membership of 5 million people, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME), African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AME Zion) and Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) denominations are meeting at the Carolina Coliseum in Columbia, S.C., to map out strategies to help improve the lives of black men, their families and communities.

George W. C. Walker Sr., senior bishop of the AME Zion Church, said African-American men are "noticeably absent" in church and the home. "If we can find answers to what is happening with the black male in this country, these solutions will have a positive impact on black family life in this nation," he said.

The group also points to statistics reporting that only 41 percent of African-American males graduate from high school and nearly 60 percent of young offenders serving time in adult state prisons are black, though African-Americans comprise only 15 percent of the youth population. According to the Centers for Disease Control, homicide is the leading cause of death among African American males between 15 and 34 years old.

Civic leaders, politicians, educators and others will speak during the gathering, focusing particularly on issues confronting black males between the ages of 12 and 25.

"We have the collective resources within our own denominations to address the problems in our communities," Bishop William H. Graves of the CME Church said.

He said African-American churches should not look to the government or other agencies to "do this for us." "We can do it ourselves," Graves said.

President Barack Obama and Congressman James Clyburn (D-SC) have been invited to speak at the summit, but confirmed speakers include Children's Defense Fund founder Marian Wright Edelman; Jawanza Kunjufu, author of *Reducing the Male Drop Out Rate*; and Teresa L. Fry, director of Black Church Studies at Emory University.

More than 6,000 people are expected to attend the summit, which includes worship services, seminars, panel discussions and music by gospel artist Hezekiah Walker.

While much of the attention will focus on addressing the plight of black men in America, leaders say that having three major Methodist denominations come together is an accomplishment in itself.

"Together, all our denominations represent a people and a community with many ills and problems," said the Rev. John R. Bryant, senior bishop of the AME Church.

"We feel strongly that we can overcome all that might separate our churches so we can all focus collectively on what we can do to make things better for our people," he added.