

A.R. BERNARD: A Trumpet for Racial Reconciliation

A banker for 10 years before starting a storefront church in Brooklyn, A.R. Bernard is one of the few religious leaders today with the ear of New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio. Until the pastor decided his destiny lay elsewhere, a grass-roots group considered drafting Bernard to run for mayor in 2013.

A highly sought-after speaker, author, teacher and community leader, Bernard is president of the Council on Churches of the City of New York, representing 1.5 million Christians.

That small church he started in 1978 today is one of the most influential in the Big Apple. Christian Cultural Center has more than 37,000 registered members and sits on 11.5 acres of prime real estate, a visible sign of Christianity in a city known more for its worldly landmarks than its churches.

Bishop Harry Jackson credits the calming influence of Bernard and his church with helping prevent New York from exploding amid racial tension after the July 2014 death of Eric Garner and subsequent slaying of two police officers.

“That’s really the role of the church, to be an advocate for ‘the least of these’ and a counsel to those who possess political and financial power,” says Jackson, who works with Bernard on a racial reconciliation movement started after last summer’s riots in Ferguson, Missouri.

“He has done that phenomenally. He’s got a biblical understanding of how the church is to operate in the culture. I feel inadequate expressing his virtues. He’s so intelligent and well-read—his perspective is amazing.”