

Once a Loyal Muslim, A.R. BERNARD Now Marches to a Different Drum

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The day before the infamous “Blizzard of 1996,” when the New York City air was as bone cold and biting as it gets in January, the crowd outside the Christian Life Centre was already swelling. Men, women and small children awaiting the start of Sunday services huddled inside a tent, shielding themselves from the swirling wind.

It may seem unusual for churchgoers to show up 30 minutes before the doors open—even more so given the big storm churning its way up the coast. But there is little that is ordinary about the Christian Life Centre and its popular pastor, A.R. Bernard Sr.

One example: Instead of toting tambourines—a staple at most black churches—members carry laptop computers and note pads.

Another example: In an era when the number of men who attend church is on a steady slide, they are quite visible here. In fact, men make up 52 percent of the Christian Life Centre membership.

And instead of delivering sermons where, as Bernard says: “The preacher pacifies the people with, ‘Don’t worry, everything will be all right,’” this 42-year-old father of two is grabbing the Christian world by its collar. His is a message of discipline, self-reliance, financial independence and a call for stronger, more visible male leadership in the community.

Sound familiar? To followers of the Nation of Islam, these principles are the foundation of the Black Muslim faith.

But the doctrine that Bernard preaches is fundamentally different from the one espoused by Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan. And it's gaining momentum as fast as his church's climb in membership—from just his wife and sons in 1978 to more than 5,000 today.

A Search for Truth

Because the black church for so long failed to address discipline and responsibility, the Nation of Islam has been a lightning rod for scores of black men looking for a religion that speaks to them, Bernard believes.

Bernard talks from experience. He describes his six-year relationship with the Nation of Islam as a “flirtation.”

That flirtation would later become a defining touchstone in his quest for spiritual truth. Wearing conservative suits, round-frame glasses and a meticulously shaped mustache and beard, he looks as if he would be a comfortable fit in any corporate boardroom. But for Alphonso R. Bernard Sr., the path to the pulpit was hardly a smooth one.

He was born in Panama to a mother who was black and a father who was a white Spaniard, and he learned early in life about rejection.

“The day my mother brought me out of the hospital, my father denied me,” he says. “For the next three years, my mother cared for me, but she was ostracized and lost a scholarship to Tuskegee [Alabama] Institute, as well as a position in the Olympics.”

In 1957, with the help of her family, Bernard's mother gathered their belongings, and they both started fresh in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, New York. As he grew

up, Bernard heard more and more about a man named Malcolm X and a group called the Nation of Islam. What captured his fascination as a teenager, he admits, was the Nation's "strength and order. Those are the things that attract any man, especially young men."

And so began the flirtation for the 16-year-old Bernard—from 1969 to 1975—an odyssey that he calls "a search for truth."

Though he regularly visited mosques in Brooklyn and Harlem, Bernard minimizes his Muslim involvement because he did not fully commit himself to all of the beliefs, though he admits he gave up eating pork. Mostly, his attention was lured to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, the former leader of the Nation of Islam.

"[Muhammad] really attempted to address the economic plight of the black man in America, which the Christian church, for me, had failed to do," Bernard remembers. "He began to bring dignity to the black man, and black men began to rehabilitate and reform."

But Bernard's infatuation with Black Muslim ideas soon faded. It was a few years into his experience with the Nation of Islam that he began to tire of some of the rhetoric—often laden with hatred—for which Black Muslims are infamous. In those days, Bernard would compare his father's role in his birth to the "rape perpetrated upon the black community here in America?"

He began to immerse himself in reading about more religions, even Hinduism and Buddhism. Then he went to hear a sermon by Nicky Cruz, a gang member turned Christian minister.

During the church service that night of Jan. 11, 1975, he felt the need to make a choice in his life. After all the pain he had experienced growing up, Bernard says he began to see God "from God's eyes."

His hunger for spiritual truth led him to the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), the nation's largest black Pentecostal denomination.

"I saw the power of God expressed in their worship. The people were exuberant, quoting Scriptures, and I was so impressed," Bernard says. So impressed, in fact, that he joined the church. Then he bought and read every different Bible he could find, absorbing the various commentaries.

Later, he became a licensed and ordained minister in COGIC and quickly became a preacher sought for his ability to appeal to young people. He resisted offers to pastor established churches, opting instead to turn an old storefront into a makeshift sanctuary and start his own independent congregation.

A New Male Order

Early in his ministry Bernard began to focus on reaching black men for Christ. The fact that his church boasts a 52 percent male membership is a direct result of his involvement in the Nation of Islam, he admits.

"One of the things I did not put aside when I came to Christ is the discipline, order and strength that I believe is a necessary part of manhood. This is a vital part of my ministry," Bernard told *Charisma*.

In Bernard's view, the Nation of Islam gets its strength by focusing on men. In contrast, black Christian churches in the United States tend to put their emphasis on women, he says, and as a result fewer black men have been drawn into the faith.

"The whole service, the sermon—everything is geared toward the women and the children," he explains. He holds a view of men and women that might sound like sexist stereotyping: "Men are thinkers: They reason by nature. Women are emotional. The

services and sermons in black churches rarely appeal to the mind but to the emotions.”

To fix this problem, Bernard is convinced, the black Christian church needs to revamp its identification and start appealing to men.

People are only willing to be involved to the degree that they are willing to be identified with an institution,” he says. “If a man cannot identify with what he has seen, then he is not going to be involved—he’ll send his wife and children.”

Like the Nation of Islam, the black Christian church should also “begin to focus on disciplining their men so their men can discipline their families,” he says.

But that’s where Bernard’s admiration for the Nation of Islam ends. He sees the group, under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan, heading toward turmoil. “There is going to be a lot of strife because the directives are not clear,” he predicts.

He remembers Elijah Muhammad’s popular “Message to the Black Man” and other directives the movement’s frail early leader espoused. “He had a 10-point program of total separation that he set before America, the establishment of a tract of land for the black man, a 20- to 25-year support agreement for reparations,” Bernard notes. In comparison, he says, the message today is vague, with few clear goals.

One of the elements of the Nation of Islam that Bernard rejected years ago was its message of racial hatred. That component, he believes, will be its downfall.

I know exactly where they are going if they continue this way,” he says. “There is only one end to hatred. Hatred has a self-consumptive destiny; once it consumes the enemy, it turns on self.”

Farrakhan: Sincerely Wrong

Other prominent leaders in the black church agree with Bernard's assessment of Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam. They also appreciate Bernard's focus on discipline and responsibility at Christian Life Centre.

Glenn R. Plummer, a prominent leader in black Christian broadcasting, says he's concerned that many Christians "are afraid to apply discipline or require wholesome living and responsibility, as Farrakhan does. We should require those standards; but we are afraid that if we do, we'll lose the men."

Many black Christians were fence sitters with their opinions of the Million Man March on Washington, D.C., orchestrated by the Nation of Islam in November. Because of Farrakhan's visible role, some Christian leaders feared they would lose credibility by association. Others saw the gathering as a chance to cross the spiritual divide with a show of black solidarity.

It wasn't a difficult decision for Bernard, however. Marching with Farrakhan was not an option for him.

"I could not and would not go to the Million Man March for the sole reason of not wanting to make an identification with Farrakhan," he states. "I believed that he was going to use the occasion as a platform to validate himself as spokesman for the black community."

Today, many believe the march succeeded in propelling Farrakhan from the fringes of extremism to the fast track of mainstream black idealism, as Bernard predicted. But Farrakhan may have pressed his newfound credibility a bit too far: His inflammatory statements made against the United States during a recent visit to Iran, Iraq and Libya have plunged him into howling controversy.

For now, it doesn't seem that huge numbers of young black men are signing up to follow Farrakhan on his mission to create

his black separatist state. But Bernard plans to do whatever he can to point his brothers away from racial hatred. Already a respected leader in the black church nationwide, Bernard will assume an even more visible role this month when he addresses an integrated crowd at a Promise Keepers conference in Washington, D.C.

Is Bernard's strategy working? He finds encouragement every Sunday at his church when he talks to men like Steven Richardson: male, black and at 28, a prime candidate for the Nation of Islam.

In fact, Richardson joined the Nation as a teenager—drawn to the group, he says, because of its appearance of strength and unity. Then he visited Christian Life Centre in Brooklyn.

"I saw my mother, who was already a member of the church, applying what they were learning," he says. "And when I came with her, Bernard's messages were speaking to me. He ministered to the spirit; the Nation was more stuck on the nationalistic self "

Formerly part of the Fruit of Islam, the Nation's security force, Richardson is now a member of the Christian Life Centre's security detail. Once he stood in defense of Louis Farrakhan; today he stands guard during church services in this crime-ridden area of Brooklyn.

Being at Christian Life Centre has changed my life," he declares. "I know the Nation of Islam means well, but I know they are sincerely wrong. You can have on a fine suit, be clean-shaven and still be spiritually dead."

Pastor A.R. Bernard hopes that Steven Richardson's story will be repeated many times over. His dream is that the next time a million black men march in the nation's capital, they will be rallying for the cause of Christ.