



(St. Mark A.M.E.Z Church in Chicago)

CHURCH ANNIVERSARY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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Be sure that each generation is represented during your Church Anniversary celebration:

1983–2001: New Boomers

1965–1982: Generation X

1946–1964: Baby Boomers

1929–1945: The Lucky Few or the Great Depression Generation

1909–1928: Good Warriors

1890–1908: Hard Timers

1871–1889: New Worlders

I. Church Anniversary: Collective Remembrance and Reconnection



In the Jewish tradition, families reconnect with their ancient ancestors and remember their collective history as recorded in the Book of Exodus when they participate in a ritual feast that marks the beginning of Passover at the Passover *seder* meal.¹ The best-known quote from the Haggadah (the book read during the Passover seder meal) is, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” This scripted question is usually asked by the youngest person at the table, and is meant to express the child’s confusion at the difference between typical elements of an everyday or holiday meal and the unusual features of the Passover meal.

In response to the child’s scripted inquiry, the family participates in various ritual acts around the meal table including the recitation of blessings, the washing of hands, the stylized consumption of symbolic foods, the saying of grace, the singing of songs of praise, and the benediction. At a pivotal point in the meal, the young child poses four questions, which highlight the differences between *that* meal and all the others they have consumed. An integral part of the Passover seder meal is the group’s **collective reflection** upon the history of the Jewish people as detailed in the Exodus narrative.

What the Jewish people may know, and, I suggest, many who worship in our African American churches understand, is that it is critically important to set aside time to **remember and reconnect** with our collective history. In many African American churches, that special time of **remembrance and reconnection** is the celebration of the annual church anniversary.

Tools of Remembrance and Reconnection

As a result of their sheer existence, African American churches have robust histories. Many African American churches played critical roles in the collective struggle of and against slavery, challenges of Reconstruction, triumphs of the Civil Rights movement, and the celebration of the election of this country’s first African American President. Members of Mount Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church of Small Gloucester, New Jersey (organized in 1788, built in 1834) supported the Underground Railroad and actively provided protection, supplies, and shelter for runaway slaves.² A group of slaves on the Dickson Plantation received permission to worship under a tree and organized

what would become St. Paul CME church in Jackson, Tennessee (property deeded in 1870–77).³

In addition to nurturing and supporting individuals such as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, Daisy Bates, Nannie H. Burroughs, Gloster B. Current, Mahalia Jackson, and Fred Shuttlesworth, all of whom offered their leadership skills, personal finances, and public personas to the cause of equal rights, local churches like First Baptist Church in Nashville, Tennessee, served as organizational resources for the Civil Rights movement. Finally, most recently, grassroots organizations partnered with churches throughout the United States to support the 2008 presidential campaign of Barack H. Obama. Indeed, there are rich histories to celebrate in our African American churches.



In addition to large-scale, global histories and contributions, our local churches boast important events and individuals that warrant remembrance and reconnection.

II. Testimonies of Remembrance and Reconnection

The annual church anniversary is, indeed, special. This day in the life of the local church is ‘different from all other’ Sundays for those of the African American church. At its best, the annual church anniversary is special because, borrowing from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, meaningful and persuasive elements of the annual church anniversary stir participants’ convictions about 1) their personal and their church’s shared values and collective character (ethos), 2) their emotional connection to the place, the experiences, and the people of the church (pathos), and 3) their central argument or missional purpose as a church (logos).

I asked my family, friends, colleagues, and Twitter community members, “What are some of your annual Church Anniversary memories?” Their responses suggested that this particular Sunday was indeed special. Further, as the following listing demonstrates, the event elements that made the annual church anniversary a special Sunday closely align with the three elements of rhetoric.

Annual Church Anniversary Memories

Elements of Ethos: Reconnection with the celebrated character of the church

- “Commemoration of founding members”
- “Recognition of longest-standing member still present in the congregation”
- “Recognition of laypersons who have worked many years ‘behind the scenes’”

Elements of Pathos: Invocation of distinct emotions attached to being a part of the church

- “Church anniversary colors. Folks trying to find suites to match the anniversary colors.”
- “4–5 hour services”
- “Frappe, plastic tablecloths, soft mints and finger sandwiches”
- “Special food”
- “The dinner feast after church service”
- “A and B selections from each choir”
- “Good music”
- “All the choirs sang”
- “The return of church ‘family’ members who had relocated or changed their local church membership”

Elements of Logos: Reminders of communal mission, purpose, or position of the church

- “Reading the church history”
- “Banner outside reading, ‘Celebrating ____ years!’”
- “Speeches”
- “The return of former pastors to preach”
- “A speech from the head deacon, trustee, or head steward”
- “Words from an elderly member”

As I interpret others’ memories of the annual church anniversary experience, it is clear that the Church Anniversary is an opportunity to remind current members of the shared personality or character of the church, illicit positive feelings about being affiliated with a particular church, and re-member the all-important reason for the church, which inevitably centers on the role of Christ in the life of the church, its members, and its community.

III. Illustrations of Remembrance and Reconnection

1. “**The 16th Street Baptist Church** was a block over from the A. G. Gaston Motel which was across from the Kelly Ingram Park. It was [what was considered in the 1950s and 60s] a large church—400 members strong—with a history in the Black community that began in 1873, only two years after the city of Birmingham was incorporated. Being in close proximity to the downtown area, it was an ideal location for organizers to hold rallies and meetings.”⁴

Photo of 16th Street Baptist Church (Birmingham, AL)



The 16th Street Baptist Church was also the place where four little black girls lost their lives. They are listed below, clockwise left: Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Denise McNair.



2. Poetry

“The Grace of these Elders has been gravely earned and sorely paid for.

The winds blew

The storms raged

And they stood like pillars.

Elder Grace

The rains came

And the snows fell

And they stood like giants.
Elder Grace ...”⁵

3. Litany for Christian Unity

Let us ask the Lord to strengthen in all Christian faith in Christ, the Savior of the world.

Listen to us, O Lord.

Let us ask the Lord to sustain and guide each Christian, with His gifts along the way, so that we reach full unity.

Listen to us, O Lord.

Let us ask the Lord for the gift of unity and peace for the world.

Listen to us, O Lord.

Let us pray. We ask you, O Lord, for the gifts of your Spirit.

Enable us to penetrate the depth of the whole truth, and grant that we may share with others the goods you have put at our disposal.

Teach us to overcome divisions. Send us your Spirit to lead to full unity, your sons and daughters in full charity in obedience to your will, through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**⁶

IV. Songs of Remembrance and Reconnection

1. Children’s Songs

The following songs are easy to learn, contain messages that are appropriate for ages 5-17 and lend themselves to active involvement by those singing and those participating from the pew.

Higher, Higher

Higher, higher, higher, higher, higher, higher, higher, higher.

Lift Jesus higher!

Lower, lower, lower, lower, lower, lower, lower, lower,

Stomp the devil lower!

Super, super, super, super, super, super, super, super.

Supernatural power!⁷

The Jesus in Me

The Jesus in me loves the Jesus in you,

The Jesus in me loves the Jesus in you,

So easy,
So easy,
So easy,
So easy to love.⁸

2. Hymns and Anthems

The following songs reflect the notion of Christian unity as well as African American historicity.

The Church's One Foundation

The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord;
She is his new creation by water and the Word.
From heaven he came and sought her to be his holy bride;
With his own blood he bought her, and for her life he died.⁹

And Yet We Are Yet Alive

And are we yet alive, and see each other's face?
Glory and thanks to Jesus give for his almighty grace!¹⁰

Lift Every Voice and Sing (first stanza)

Lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise high as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us;
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day being,
Let us march on till victory is won.¹¹

3. A Song That Celebrates Difference

When sung both in its original language and English, this song communicates the hope that all Christians, regardless of their differences, share.

Siyahamba/We Are Marching in the Light of God

We are marching in the light of God, we are marching in the light of God.
We are marching in the light of God, we are marching in the light of God.
We are marching, Oo we are marching in the light of God.
We are marching, Oo we are marching in the light of God.

Siyahamb' ekukhanyen' kwenkhos', siyahamb' ekukhanyen' kwenkhos'.
Siyahamb' ekukhanyen' kwenkhos', siyahamb' ekukhanyen' kwenkhos'.
Siyahamba, Oo siyahamb' ekukhanyen' kwenkhos'.

Siyahamba, Oo siyahamb' ekukhanyen' kwenkhos'.

V. Creating Memorable Learning Moments of Remembrance and Reconnection

1. Quilting Activity

As a production of the rich history of the African American experience, quilting circles are instructive ways to gather church community members around a common goal or focal point, its shared history. As part of its church anniversary celebration, the local church may establish a quilting circle. This quilting group would meet weekly to create a church quilt that would have as its thematic focus the history and history-makers of the church. Importantly, the creation of this group provides a space for participants to reflect upon their personal Christian experiences and in so doing, align with the central message of our Scripture for this year, Colossians 1:15-19: Christ is the center of all activity.

2. Archaeological Experiment

In keeping with the idea that one often must 'dig up' their history in order to know their history, this activity allows children to participate in and contribute meaningfully to the church anniversary celebration. Adults collect examples of historic symbols of the church and hide them in the church building, upon the church grounds, and throughout the church's property. After a moment of storytelling in which the collective church history is recounted, the children are given a list of things to find, a simple map, and an adult 'looking partner' to aid them in their search. After the majority of the historical artifacts are found, select children prepare to share what they found and its meaning during church service during the Church Anniversary.

3. Archival Initiative

The intergenerational archival initiative leverages the growing popularity of genealogy projects in which everyday people search for their ancestors using public records, private documentation, electronic databases, and television programs like NBC's "Who Do You Think You Are?" In order to establish a church archive, youth, adults, and 'seasoned saints' spend three to six months working in teams to discover and document the history of a family or individual connected to the history of the church. Team members identify a family or individual who figured prominently in the establishment of the church or the social activity of the church during a critical period in history and work with library resources to find out as much about the family or individual as possible. The team presents their findings along with a final document for the church archival files to the church as part of the church anniversary celebration.

4. A View from the Margins

Youth (ages 13–17) and young adults (ages 18–35) identify ways in which their local church does **not** align with the admonition to keep Christ first as found in Colossians 1:15-19, and interview members of marginalized communities about their experiences with the church. This project provides a way to engage

communities that generally are underserved by our congregations (i.e. LGBTQ, ex-convicts, young single mothers, addicts, veterans, the chronically ill, etc.), and a vehicle through which generally tech-savvy youth and young adults could take ownership of doing this work in the church. As part of the church's anniversary celebration, the "A View from the Margin" video could be played for the congregation. This video may also serve as fodder for the church's future missional and evangelistic activities.

VI. Audio and Visual Aides of Remembrance and Reconnection

The following music and images may be used by worship leaders, teachers, and preachers to remind congregations of the long-standing relationship the church and its members have with the savior of the world, Jesus Christ. The songs uniquely speak to eternal truths and pivotal moments in African American history.

1. "For Every Mountain," performed by Kurt Carr Singers, reminds the viewer of the church and its members' long-standing reliance on Christ. Click the YouTube button for viewing <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUaGoS2LW5g&feature=related>
2. "I'm Buildin' Me a Home," performed by Morehouse College Glee Club, speaks to the importance of religion for ancestors and the preservation of uniquely African American historic experiences on our historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Click the YouTube button for viewing. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTMISj7gS5A>
3. "How I Got Over," performed by Mahalia Jackson, highlights the important connection between gospel and the Civil Rights movement. Click the YouTube button for viewing. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTOSUMSjMWw>

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7. “How I Got Over,” by Clara Ward, 188 Songs of Zion. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1981. “How I Got Over,” performed by Mahalia Jackson at the March on Washington (1963) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTOSUMSjMWw>
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Notes

1. Hebrew, seder, meaning ‘arrangement,’ or ‘order.’
2. <http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/nj4.htm>
3. www.stpaulmechurch.org
4. HBO. HBO Presents 4 Little Girls. Commemorative book for promotional purposes only, 1998. p. 24.

5. Angelou, Maya. "Forward," in Elder Grace: The Nobility of Aging by Chester Higgins, Jr. Boston: Bulfinch Press, 2000.
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