



CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Introduction

A. Celebration of Leadership

Few celebrations in the black church equal what is done when black congregations celebrate their pastor on Pastor's Anniversary Sunday. Other than Christmas and Easter, no other moments on the Church's calendar exceed the importance of a church's Pastor Anniversary. This liturgical moment is always a time of exhilaration and joy. Moreover, the pastor and his/her family is usually also celebrated in high form. No expense is spared, especially if the pastor has served the congregation a long time, and has been a powerful preacher with deep community roots. Often, it is a time of recollection which focuses on the preaching abilities, leadership skills, administrative strengths, and spiritual vision of the particular pastor. At this time, pure agape love is triumphant.

Black preachers, especially those who become pastors, can be powerful figures. Their connections to their congregants are usually solidified over a period of years. Strong bonds, some visible and some invisible, between the pastor and congregation function as a source of the pastor's authority. To a great extent, the black pastor's duties and daily works are less defined by written contracts and church doctrine than they are by history, practice and the personal skills and personality of the individual pastor.

Black preachers, in their role as pastor, perform many tasks: counselor, community organizer, preacher, spiritual guide and biblical interpreter, marriage and divorce counselor, teacher, community builder and spokesperson, educator and healer, to name but a few. During a pastor's

anniversary, church and community come together to express their appreciation and genuine love for the one individual who is able to interpret messages from God, function as a buffer between the community and the state, and provide everyone with a vision of hope: the pastor. Pastors are leaders, called by God and affirmed by the people. They are ultimately servants.

There is no public aspect of black life that has not been touched by the black preacher. From the brush harbor days of the past to the mega church days of the present, the black preacher has played a major role in the development of black institutions and black life. It has been written that the black church was the first free black institution.¹ The church, as an institution, was legal before the black family gained its institutional freedom, according to some historians.² The black church, since its early days, has been birthed, led and nurtured by black preachers. They led anti-slavery movements, freedom movements, reconstruction movements, political movements, civil rights movements and faith based movements. They have built schools, colleges, financial institutions, and health agencies. They have led from the front, back and middle. At times, they have pushed the people towards freedom and righteousness, and on other occasions they have dragged them. As was said in lectionary material last year, according to W. E. B. Dubois, “The black preacher ... is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil.”³ Thus, on Pastor’s Anniversary, black churches have much to celebrate—the pastor and their very survival in an alien land.

B. The Pastor’s Evolving Role

The role of the black pastor has not always been as broad, free flowing and nimble as it is today. Preachers, like other segments of the black community, have always had to be cognizant and respectful of the boundaries set by the dominant society. Some things, however, have been a consistent part of the pastor’s role: preaching the Word of God to the congregation (many did so only within the bounds of allowed practice; while others bravely stood and preached in the face of death), conducting baptisms, weddings and funerals, counseling congregants on Christian living, visiting the sick and shut-ins, assisting the homeless and down trodden, and religious training of the children of the community.

Over time, the pastor’s role as freedom fighter, protestor, civil rights champion, voting rights spokesperson, and community and world leader and activist has expanded from the secretive, Underground Railroad work of Harriet Tubman to the provocative and public stances of Rev. Sojourner Truth, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rev. Al Sharpton, and Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright. Admittedly, this evolution, which has been carefully nurtured by the black church, has not been easy. It has come with a stiff price: beatings, hangings, floggings, castrations, loss of jobs, closure of schools and businesses, jail and prison terms and even harsher punishments.

Thus, when the congregation and pastor, on Pastor’s Anniversary Sunday, sing, “Here am I, Lord, send me. Here am I, I’ll heed your voice, obey your will. Here am I, Lord, send me. Here am I: I will gladly do your bid! I will gladly do your bid,” it is not a lightly conceived matter.⁴ It is a recognition of a relationship between pastor and people that has been solidified over time, a knowledge of a work that is unfinished, a quest to submit to a call and a cause that is greater than the impending danger that a pastor faces, and it is a belief in the faithfulness of God, the one who

sends all true pastors.

Since the work is unfinished and the issues and problems faced by the black church are still massive, the pastor's role, by necessity, is an evolving one. Stagnancy will not breed progress, and the tactics and strategies of the past, alone, will not resolve the human, religious, spiritual and cultural issues of today. Thus, while Pastor's Anniversary Day is a day to celebrate the Pastor as an individual, it is also a day that is used to inspire the congregation and the Pastor to continue the Christian fight—continue the march for social justice and human rights.

II. Expanding the Celebration for the Twenty-First Century

Traditionally, Pastor's Anniversary Sunday in the black church focuses entirely on the senior pastor. Some churches have had the foresight to include the pastor's spouse and children, because of the contributions they make to and the sacrifices they make for the church. The time has come to generally expand the reach of the Pastor's Anniversary celebration.

Many churches, small and large, have a ministerial staff that includes assistant and associate pastors. Usually, their work is delegated and supervised by the senior pastor. Often, they have specific duties that they perform and specific ministries that they develop (e.g., health and social services, elderly, sick and shut ins, congregational care, children and youth, singles, seniors, etc). The modern needs and size of black churches dictate the need for these associate and assistant pastors. They are crucial arms of the senior pastor, whether paid or unpaid. Most often they are unpaid or under-paid.

As such, they, too, should be celebrated on Pastor's Anniversary Sunday. Congregations and **Pastor Anniversary committees should begin to work with the senior pastor of their church to find the best way to recognize and celebrate everyone on the ministerial staff.** This expansion, if done creatively and in the right spirit, will not have a deleterious impact on the celebration for the senior pastor. It is time to expand. It is time for change!

III. Back Roads of My Memory

In my youth, my home church's celebration of Pastor's Anniversary in central Mississippi, just outside of Jackson, the state capital, was a very special day. It was a day of great preaching and singing. It was a time of special giving, exhibition of appreciation and love of the pastor by every auxiliary and department of the church. Too, there were the special gifts to the pastor of new suits, shoes, hats, shirts, and ties.

For me, however, the best part of the Pastor's Anniversary service came in the middle of the day, after the morning service and before the afternoon anniversary program. It was then that the communion table (in my young mind, one of the most sacred pieces of furniture in the church) was moved directly in front of the pulpit.

Because we had no other area in which to dine, the communion table was turned into a dining table. It was draped with a fancy white lace table cloth on which place settings, with large white napkins and crystal drinking glasses for sweet tea and water for the pastor, his wife, guests and

chairman of the board of deacons were set. It was magical. They were served by the mothers of the church, many of whom were professional servers, since they made their living serving on a daily basis. The servers were all decked out in white uniforms and wearing their best aprons. And, they only chose food from the boxes and baskets of the church's best cooks—usually their own—for the pastor's table. Through my child's eyes, the people seated at that table seemed as important as the President of the United States. I stared in wonderment.

IV. Enhancing the Celebration for the Twenty-First Century

Churches can use the Pastor's Anniversary celebration to collect and codify the history of a church. Chronicling the church's founding and growth and identifying, including photographically, each individual who has served as pastor of the church, is an important anniversary task. Full written biographies of each pastor should be developed. Oral histories taken from members of the congregation and community, and members of surrounding churches also can be developed. This information can be used to create DVDs and videos.

Further, if the community or church has professional or hobby artists, this would be a good time to commission works of art for the pastor and the church. The same can be done through the church's music department. Anniversary CDs can be made. Also, the Anniversary program can be taped and presented to the pastor as a keepsake and to the church's library for its church history section.

Finally, resolutions can be obtained from local governments, state governments and federal congresspersons that recognize and celebrate the pastor's contribution to the church, and the general community.

V. General Check-Up Time

Pastor anniversary time is also a good time for the officers of the church (deacons, trustees, elders, etc.) to look at the pastor's contract, if he or she has one, to see if there should be upward adjustments in salaries and/or benefits. Special attention should be given to health, social security and retirement benefits. These are areas that are often overlooked by church officers and pastors. Greater attention is usually given to base salary. In these lean times, shifting health care costs from the pastor, as a payment obligation, and increasing retirement benefits may be just as important to a pastor as his/her base salary.

Special attention should also be given to how the poorest members of the church can be afforded opportunities to make special gifts to the pastor without unduly stretching their budgets, or making them feel like outsiders, because their contributions may be small when compared to those made by others.

At all times, especially during time of recession, churches and pastors should consider setting examples for the membership and community. **For example, in those communities that have black colleges and universities or other churches with large dining facilities, black churches**

should consider using their facilities for large gatherings, rather than the expensive hotels and other commercial facilities that do not contribute anything to the black community—in some instances, not even jobs! “Smart Self-help” should become the motto for all of our financial church expenditures. Let’s start with Pastor’s Anniversary Sunday. If we cannot do this then, when?

VI. Songs for the Occasion

Consummate pastoral anniversary music favorites follow.

A Charge to Keep I have

A charge to keep I have,
A God to glorify,
A never-dying soul to save,
And fit it for the sky.

To serve the present age,
My calling to fulfill:
O may it all my powers engage
To do my Master's will!

Arm me with jealous care,
As in thy sight to live;
And O thy servant, Lord, prepare
A strict account to give!

Help me to watch and pray,
And on thyself rely,
Assured, if I my trust betray,
I shall forever die.⁵

It Is Well With My Soul

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, thou has taught me to say,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

Refrain

*It is well, with my soul,
It is well, with my soul,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.*

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,

That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed his own blood for my soul.

Refrain

My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

Refrain

For me, be it Christ, be it Christ hence to live:
If Jordan above me shall roll,
No pang shall be mine, for in death as in life
Thou wilt whisper thy peace to my soul.

Refrain

But, Lord, 'tis for thee, for thy coming we wait,
The sky, not the grave, is our goal;
Oh trump of the angel! Oh voice of the Lord!
Blessèd hope, blessèd rest of my soul!

Refrain

And Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
Even so, it is well with my soul.

*Refrain*⁶

Give of Your Best to the Master

Give of your best to the Master, give of the strength of your youth.
Throw your soul's fresh glowing ardor, into the battle for truth.
Jesus has set the example, dauntless was he, young and brave;
Give him your loyal devotion, give him the best that you have.

Refrain

Give of your best to the Master;
Give of the strength of your youth.
Clad in Salvation's full armor;

Join in the battle for truth.

Give of your best to the Master, give him first place in your heart.
Give him first place in your service, consecrate every part.
Give, and to you will be given, God his beloved son gave.
Gratefully seeking to serve him, give him the best that you have.

Refrain

Give of your best to the Master;
Give of the strength of your youth.
Clad in salvation's full armor;
Join in the battle for truth.

Give of your best to the Master, naught else is worthy his Love.
He gave himself for your ransom, gave up his glory above.
Laid down his life without murmur, you from sin's ruin to save.
Give him your heart's adoration, give him the best that you have.

Refrain

Give of your best to the Master;
Give of the strength of your youth.
Clad in salvation's full armor;
Join in the battle for truth.⁷

Notes

1. Branch, Taylor. Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1988. p. 2
2. Ibid., p. 2.
3. Ibid., p. 3.
4. African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #466
5. Ibid., p. 467.
6. Ibid., p. 377.
7. Ibid., p. 465.