

Michael I. N. Dash

On African American Congregations

Interviewer: Tracy Schier



Michael Dash is a clergy member of the New York Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, and, since 1985, a faculty member of Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta. His experience includes pastoral appointments in the Caribbean and New York and a period working on the staff of his denomination's General Board of Discipleship in Nashville. In the mid 1990s, he directed a rural communities project on "Developing Leaders, Building Communities" with a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Dash's interest in spirituality and spiritual formation resulted in the 1997 book, co-authored with Jonathan Jackson and Stephen C. Rasor, *Hidden Wholeness: An African American Spirituality for Individuals and Communities* (United Church Press, 1997).

For the past three years Dash has been involved in research on African-American congregations that is part of a national study of religious life in the U.S. That larger study, entitled *Faith Communities Today: A Report on Religion in the United States* (FACT), was a Hartford Seminary-based national survey of forty-two religious denominations. That work included Catholics, Muslims, Baha'i, Jewish, and Protestant congregations. Dash and colleagues at ITC were invited to gather data on seven historically black congregations. This work, *Project 2000*, was funded by the Lilly Endowment and the Ford Foundation and looked specifically at seven denominations: Baptist, Church of God in Christ (COGIC), African Methodist Episcopal (AME), African Methodist

Episcopal Zion (AMEZ), Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME), Black pastors in the United Methodist Church, and Black pastors in the Presbyterian Church (USA). The survey work of Project 2000 covered six broad areas: worship and identity; location and facilities; internal and mission oriented programs; leadership and organizational dynamics; participants; and finances. With assistance from the Gallup Organization, interviews were conducted with some 1900 pastors and senior lay leaders. ITC students collected an additional 400 surveys, mostly of churches in the rural areas of the south.

Dash and collaborator Christine D. Chapman have presented the results of Project 2000 in two books: *The Shape of Zion: Leadership and Life in Black Churches* (Pilgrim Press, 2003). He has also collaborated with Stephen C. Rasor, a faculty colleague at ITC, on a companion volume, *The Mark of Zion: Congregational Life in Black Churches* (Pilgrim Press, 2003).

This conversation is edited.

Q. As you look across the country at black congregations what does your research show to be their greatest internal strengths?

A. Most importantly, there is an affirmation about the future. We have been finding that churches are spiritually alive and vital, and that generally churches are growing. And this growth is exhibited both by the development of new churches and by the enlarged membership of existing congregations. We see a lot of growth in the western states, something that reflects the westward expansion of the nation. Also, we found that the majority of black churches that were surveyed are financially stable—only three percent report that they had serious financial problems.

Vitality is exhibited in a number of ways: congregations that help their members deepen their relationship with God; members being excited about the future of their congregations; assimilation of new members into the congregation; recognizing and giving expression to their denominational heritage, and working for social justice. We find that the vast majority of Black churches have some level of involvement in their communities—whether that has to do with money assistance, food and clothing, or counseling among many other instances.

Q. What opportunities do you see the congregations availing themselves of—here I mean opportunities that come from external sources such as societal attitudes, demographics, political influences, relationships with other groups—as they move to the future?

A. We find that the black churches continue to become increasingly contextually self-aware. We see them taking initiative to identify relationships and forge alliances with those institutions and groups that are genuinely working for the common good and welfare of all persons. The churches are also becoming knowledgeable of the systems and structures in society and acquiring and cultivating the sophistication to access them in advocacy and service of the deserving and disadvantaged.

Clergy in the black churches are very active in their larger communities, especially in the areas of civil rights, but also with other social and political issues. The clergy see themselves and their congregations as advocates for persons in our society who may be overlooked or neglected. They provide many ministries for such people. Interestingly, even as they provide financial and other assistance to the poor, the churches themselves are remaining financially stable.

Q. What challenges do these churches and groups face that are caused by external factors in the environment: This is kind of the flip side of my last question.

A. It is interesting to see that black religiosity is better understood and affirmed today than it probably was 20 years ago. And yet, it still has not gained the awareness by the public, as it should. Politicians come to black churches during campaigns but often fail to draw on the day-to-day leadership throughout the years.

Q. Has the research shown any internal weaknesses in the groups you studied—weaknesses that should be corrected if progress is to continue?

A. We found that large churches have more resources and thus can do more than smaller churches. This points to the need for support of the small churches to help augment their resources. We also see some Black

denominations indicating that they are able to incorporate new members better than others. And of course we see the problem that affects the Catholics—the diminished numbers of clergy. Black clergy are getting older; they need to be replaced by younger people. The studies indicate that people go into legal and medical careers earlier than into the clergy. The black churches need to make more of a concerted effort to grow vocations out of the congregations.

Q. The last national study of black churches was the work by Eric Lincoln and Larry Mamiya that resulted in their 1990 book, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. What have you noticed that is different today from the time they did their research?

A. The most striking thing appears to be the greater growth in black churches across the board—rural, suburban and urban. Also, mega churches are more evident today. And the diversity of community outreach seems to be somewhat greater. Further, we are happy to see that clergy and laity all are somewhat more educated than in the 1980s when their research took place.

Q. In what ways do you see the learning from your recent work impacting the lived faith of black Christians in the U.S.?

A. The Project 2000 and FACT (Faith Communities Today) and the many books, articles, news stories and other efforts published from this work should enhance greater awareness and cooperation. Also, a number of conferences such as those held here at ITC and at Hartford Seminary should have helped church leaders in their efforts in congregations. We have taken advantage of dissemination strategies already established such as events and convocations that are regularly sponsored both by denominations. We also have availed ourselves of open interdenominational offerings such as the Hampton Ministers' Conference, which has been in existence more than 80 years.

We believe that all of these dissemination efforts will provide guidance for church leaders to engage their congregations and to lead them to discover or rediscover the purposes and potential of their congregations. Our findings link theology with the practice of ministry and should assist both leaders and congregation members to engage in reflection and conversation about their congregational identity and mission.

Q. What surprises emerged from the studies?

A. One surprise was that pastors discounted “internal” conflicts. Also, money issues and worship patterns seem to be less of a problem than one might assume. And, we found a very high percentage of the churches—90%—have at least some involvement in outreach.

Q. What did you learn about transmitting the faith to young people?

A. The opportunity is present and being seized. When we asked the question, “In the past 12 months, did your congregation provide or cooperate for any of the social services or community outreach programs for your own congregation’s members or for people in your community?” the response indicated that the highest percentage of all programs across the denominations were for youth. The numbers ranged between 89% and 94%. This is possible, I believe, because we are discovering that youth need to be reached where they are in order to develop meaningful programs for them. It means that we must understand something about their world and about the way they think and perceive life around them.

A recent grant from Lilly Endowment in the amount of nearly \$2 million will enable us at ITC to build on a program that we started for youth in 1994. It is the ITC Youth and Family Convocation, which started as a project of one of our Christian Education classes and has grown ever since. The distinctiveness of this program and its successors is based on the concept of “re-villaging”—reclaiming the concept of the village (community life) out of our African heritage.

Q. What have you learned about leadership in the churches—both ordained and lay?

A. Leaders are much more educated than we might have assumed earlier. And we find that, for the most part, leaders find that conflict in general is not a significant factor within their congregations. Where conflict does occur, some leaders are better than others in dealing with it. As I mentioned before, money is not as much of an issue and this is helpful for leaders—they can devote more energy to the spiritual life of their congregations and to their social

service projects and programs. We find also that the leaders are quite open to political/social advocacy.

Interestingly, we found that leadership on the part of women—in pastoral roles—is not universally accepted, but we found that in the total sample of black clergy, the better educated the pastors the more favorable they are toward women pastors. Women outnumber men three to one in rural congregations, and two to two-and-a-half to one in urban areas—similar to what Lincoln and Mamiya found over a dozen years ago. Yet, despite their numbers, women are not accepted well as pastors. This is especially true with Baptist and COGIC congregations. UMC pastors across each level of educational attainment (certificate, bible college, seminary/master's, post-master's), however, are highly in favor of clergywomen.

Q. Most black churches—some 88%—are located in urban areas. However, I'd like to know about that 12% located in rural areas and what some of their characteristics might be.

A. Let me clarify---while 12 percent of all Black churches are in rural areas, 28 percent of Christian Methodist Episcopal churches are non urban. At the other end of the scale, only four percent of Black United Methodist churches are rural.

But to get to the question about characteristics—for one thing, rural churches are not as politically active or open to women in ministry as are their urban counterparts. But they are diverse when it comes to age, income and educational level. As far as membership goes, the female to male ratio is 3 to 1. Also, we found something that was very interesting—something that debunks the stereotype of rural churches not having well educated leadership. We found that 79 percent of the rural congregations have clergy leadership with a minimum of a Bible school-level degree or diploma or more. Overall, the rural churches are upbeat about their spiritual offerings and about their impact on their communities. While they are a small part of the overall black church community, the rural churches are serving their people well and are excited about the future.

Q. Before we close, can you talk about black Christian spirituality and its importance.

A. Spirituality is a top priority among the pastors. And the Bible continues to be a significant source of African-American spirituality. Congregation leaders are taking seriously the importance of helping their members deepen their relationship with God. Our studies show that black worship has several commonalities having to do with spiritual vitality. These are praise and thanksgiving to God while being spiritually nourished; affirmation of God's providence and power; understanding the common historical African spiritual heritage and tapping into that.

The spiritual life of black Americans has a lot to do with their struggle for survival as African people in America. In the slave society, the slave ancestors forged the "sorrow" songs that came to be known as "spirituals." Those songs were affirmations of God sustaining a people in spite of the brutality and the dehumanization that they experienced. Through those spirituals slaves sang of a hope that "trouble don't last always." This hope of which they sang expresses the centrality of the spirituality of Black people. It sustains them today, as it did the ancestors, in all the adverse circumstances of life and enables them to continue to tell the story of "How [I] we got over..."