

The Effects of Few African American Missionaries

The Black church has suffered so much from slavery and its effects for many, many decades, I hesitate to write anything that may be construed as another burden. However, she is sorely needed on the world's mission fields. Over a quarter of the earth's population is still unevangelized (1,653,901,000 people)¹. The number of longterm (over 4 years) missionaries from North America is slowly declining², as the total number of missionaries globally increased to 434,000, a 1.07 percent increase over 2000³. It was too small a thing for God to save only Israel⁴, and Jesus gave a mandate to venture beyond one's own Jerusalem and Judea⁵.

If God has called, and of 36 million African Americans only 250-300 have responded (RMNI has begun a new survey to update that number), there must be consequences. What are they? First we have many unpaid "associate ministers" sitting on the "platform," who are underemployed in ministry. These could start ministering crossculturally short or longterm or in the housing projects. Preachers are plentiful—preaching is often a Black gift—perhaps contributing to the plethora of preaching opportunities created by special church services, including various and sometimes extended "anniversaries" and revival services. But there are only so many pulpits for associates.

The AfAm community is among the most religious on the globe, based upon percentages believing in God⁶. In the US 94% of Blacks compared to 72% of Whites stated that having a close relationship to God was very desirable⁷. Significant pockets needing Christ exist, such as housing developments. You'll notice many churches in the Black neighborhoods. Yet new churches spring up like crocuses. Some associate ministers plant them. I asked one young man starting a church in the midst of a community already blooming with small Black churches and a sharply lower population due to folks leaving welfare why he was doing it there. He appeared offended. He said he was responding to a clear call of God.

Why so many Black churches? Some churches are largely of one extended family—finding it compelling to have church together. Some seem to be bastions of ethnic advocacy. Not a few are pastored by liberal pastors uninterested in the Great Commission or in scriptural authority, partly because evangelical schools were slow to welcome Blacks. Independent churches with evangelical pastors also emerge, some by taking over traditional church pulpits.

Overabundant churches drain enormous resources⁸. Members naturally want to fix up their church. They want a church van, choir robes, AC and a sound system and keyboard. They want to honor their pastor with a good salary and prestigious car and maybe a bus for the choir. In some respects they may be copying the White community in the emphasis upon new buildings. New wine skins are justified when churches become religious societies. But the multiplicity

of churches sponge up almost all human and financial resources--resources that could be shared reaching the unevangelized and supporting missionaries.

Are these many churches convicting reminders of those not emerging on foreign fields? Are traditional and liberal AfAm churches becoming spiritually stagnant because they focus so much inwardly? Have ingrown AfAm churches reached a spiritual plateau for which only missions will provide the outlet to release and steward their underemployed spiritual energies? New evangelical Black "wine skins" are needed in housing projects and elsewhere whose members come primarily from genuine conversions, rather than from membership transfer. The Westside in Chattanooga could use such a church, since Sunday transportation is a problem. Such folk may not be highly sought, and tend to drain the budget rather than fund it. The hardest cases may be there among them, based sometimes upon encountering "church folk." Love Fellowship in Chattanooga has its origin in ministry in a housing project, whose founding pastor also ministers in Ghana.

The AfAm community needs ongoing ministry, as does every ethnic community. But is "churchianity" competing with the Gospel mandate? Send the associates crossculturally. Leave or change existing churches preaching a modicum of truth with maximum emotions or the health/wealth/prosperity half-truths. Advocate missions, find godly pastors, and plant new churches only where needs are obvious. Otherwise plant churches crossculturally. Instead of over-planting, resulting in stunted churches, and a draining competition for members and money, plant them where there is little competition and incredible need. The King can be trusted to care for those who care for the gospel of His Son.

1- Barrett, David B. and Todd M. Johnson, "Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission: 2003," *International bulletin of missionary research*, January 2003, p. 25.

2- 33,074 in 1996 to 32,957 in 1999. Siewert, John A. and Dotsey Welliver, eds. *Mission handbook: US and Canadian ministries overseas 2001-2003*, p. 34.

3- Barrett, p. 25.

4- Is. 49:6

5- Acts 1:8

6- "In 1981, for example, Gallup International organizations conducted surveys on religious beliefs in twenty-three nations. One question asked respondents to rank the importance of God in their lives, with 10 the top score. The highest score recorded was by American blacks--9.04." Gallup, George, Jr., and Jim Castelli. 1989. *The people's religion: American faith in the 90's*. New York, N.Y.: Macmillan Publishing Company.

7- George Barna, "African-American Adults and Faith: A National Perspective," Part II, Table 2.2.2, 1996.

8- AfAms have given a larger proportion of their gift income to “religious charities” than have whites—Hodgkinson, V. and M. Weitzman. 1990. *Giving and volunteering in the US: Findings from a national survey*. Gallup Organization. Washington, D.C.: Independent Sector, p. 41.

Jim Sutherland, Ph.D.