

RESEARCH NOTES

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THE MOSAIC OF BLACK RELIGION IN INDIANAPOLIS

by Elfriede Wedam

"Here comes everybody!" noted the Irish writer James Joyce when describing the variety of religious styles among Catholics. In a similar way, there is no single "black church," though for many the term evokes images of an emotionally charged evangelical worship style, and of poor congregations led by social-activist clergy. These images,

which derive in large part from the civil rights era, never reflected the diversity of the black church, and to the degree that they were accurate, they have become outdated. Today we find an array of worship styles and social-political stances among African-Americans. From black Catholics and Black Muslims to the many types of black Protestants, African-Americans have built a mosaic of religious practices that for many form a core element of their identity.

Although the first black congregations were formed long before the Civil War, the denominations as we know them today largely took shape after Reconstruction. They became alternative, separate organizations in response to the inferior status accorded blacks in the South, and to the paternalism with which they were treated in Northern churches.¹ The oldest black congregation in Indianapolis, founded in 1846, is Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, located continuously in the heart of the downtown area,² near the original black neighborhood where IUPUI stands today.

During the civil rights movement, a sector of black churches nationally and locally mobilized against systemic social injustices in American society and led the faith community in attacking its causes. Today it is difficult to find any black churches in Indianapolis focusing primarily on political activism. As in earlier times, many black churches focus on social welfare issues, while a preponderance of them devote their energies to preaching messages of personal salvation. This absence of political and social engagement in the black churches is revealed in our preliminary review of 92 predominately African-American congregations in 17 Indianapolis neighborhoods as part of our Project on Religion and Urban Culture.³

Culture, Place, Denomination

Many scholars of African American congregations argue that there is a unifying yet socially alternative cultural core that describes black styles of religion. For social ethicist Robert Franklin,⁴ this cultural core includes: full engagement of the senses in worship, intimate prayer, cathartic shouting, triumphant singing, politically relevant religious education, and prophetic preaching. We found that these elements are present to some degree in almost all the black churches we studied, but the variations are also important. Not all the congregations practice cathartic shouting, for example,

nor do all religious education programs contain politically relevant teaching. Some avoid any reference to the world outside the walls of the church. More interesting than the elements that are common to black churches are the ways they differ from one another geographically, theologically, and in the political stances they hold toward the wider society.

Twelve of the 17 neighborhoods contain at least one predominately African-American congregation (see map). The five neighborhoods without any black churches are near the outside borders of Marion County, including three of the four suburban areas studied. The great majority of black congregations we studied were in four neighborhoods: Martindale-Brightwood (33), the United Northwest Area (20), Mapleton-Fall Creek (11) and the Near West Side (10).

Baptist churches represent almost half (45) of all black churches in our sample, while 10 percent of the congregations are members of predominately white denominations: Assemblies of God, Disciples of Christ (Christian), Lutheran—Missouri Synod, Nazarene, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, and United Methodist.

Table 1: Denominational Affiliations of Black Churches in RUC Study Areas

Historically Black Denominations	
Baptist	45
Apostolic/Pentecostal/Holiness	14
Methodist (AME and others)	10
Nondenominational	7
Church of God in Christ	3
Nation of Islam	1
Predominately White Denominations (Assemblies of God, Disciples of Christ, Lutheran—Missouri Synod, Nazarene, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, United Methodist)	
	11
Unknown	1

Selected Demographics of Black Churches

- *Median annual budget, \$100,500
- *Median church membership, 135
- *Average participation by gender, 71% female
- *Average number of members living in the neighborhood, 35%



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Social Witness

Franklin describes five different political stances by African-American congregations to social issues.⁵ (See Table 2) *Grassroots revivalists* focus on personal salvation and individual responsibility. In our preliminary analysis, almost half, 46 percent, of black Indianapolis congregations fall into this category. *Pragmatic accommodationists* work within the democratic and capitalist systems while seeking ways to expand resources to those not currently benefiting from it. More than one-third, 37 percent, fit into this group. The next largest group, *redemptive nationalists*, represents about 13 percent of black congregations. Nationalists participate in the political system to some extent but work to form alternative social institutions. *Positive thought materialists* are a small group of congregations (4 percent) that focus on individual and personal success. *Prophetic radicals* critique the basic economic and political structures of American society. We were not able to identify any congregations in Indianapolis that can be labeled prophetic radical.

Franklin's approach offers a view of the public life of the church and a way to understand more generally how religion has influenced the civic realm. As with all typologies, his categories are helpful in understanding the elements that make congregations different from one another. Yet not all congregations fit clearly into a single category. Some congregations combine two or more types while others seem to push in new directions.

Table 2: Political/Theological Orientation of Black Churches

Grassroots revivalist	46%
Pragmatic accommodationist	37%
Redemptive nationalist	13%
Positive thought materialist	4%
Prophetic radical	0%

Note: While some congregations fit into more than one category, we focused on their major tendency to test Franklin's typology.

Black churches express themselves both with and against the wider society and use a variety of strategies to do so; not unlike other congregations, they embrace the larger culture, they accommodate it, and they criticize it. Nonetheless, we found many more congregations in the two moderate categories, pragmatic accommodation and grassroots revivalism, than among types at either end of the spectrum. The general orientation of the black churches is consistent with the cultural milieu of the larger city. Apparently, black churches that once stood outside the cultural mainstream have now moved closer to working within it. In particular, those congregations committed to responding to social needs have been forming pragmatic partnerships with governmental and private organizations where once they might have lodged protests against them.

Congregational Differences

The largest category, the *grassroots revivalists*, can be found most frequently among the storefront and other small congregations. In Indianapolis we found notable examples among larger congregations as well. The message of individual responsibility and personal morality by these congregations is familiar to many observers of

American evangelical and Pentecostal religion. Their theology of personal salvation exhorts members to be disengaged from or even contemptuous of politics. While there is strict separation between religion and political life, revivalists see no separation between religion and culture, preaching a return to what they understand to be a moral, or Christian, society.

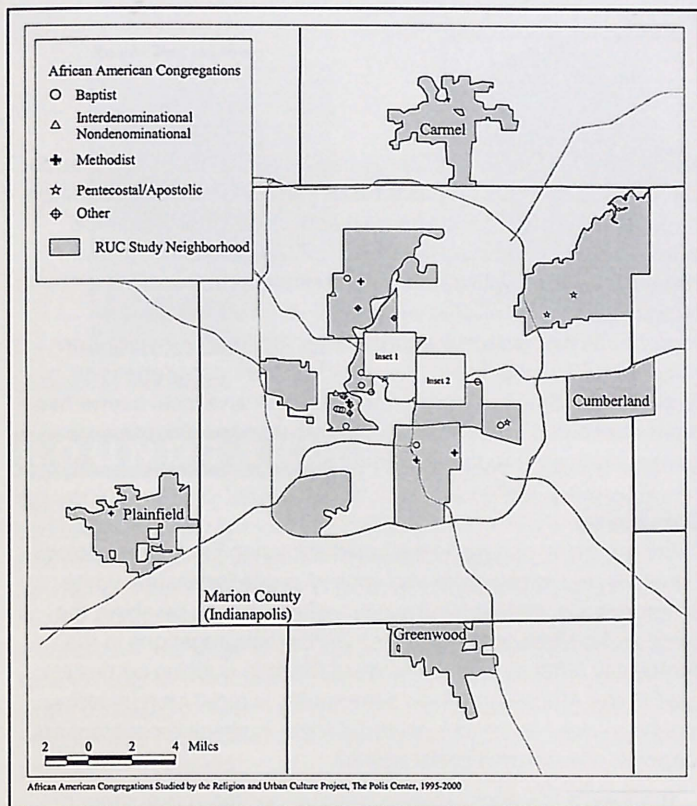
True Tried Missionary Baptist Church in the neighborhood known as UNWA (United Northwest Area), is one of many examples of grassroots revivalist churches in Indianapolis. During an observation visit, the pastor spoke of "Christian love" as the antidote to social ills: "If you don't have love of Jesus Christ in your heart, it won't mean a thing."

While the focus of these churches is on individual spiritual change, during the civil rights movement many of these congregations were mobilized by the prophetic religious leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Today they avoid political action on the whole, but the impulse to employ politics as a means to a just end simmers below the surface of many congregations.

Franklin's second category, *pragmatic accommodationist*, describes those congregations that have a reformist orientation to American culture and the political and economic systems within it. This group represents the orientation of most congregations, black or white. These congregations believe in the American dream of prosperity and embrace middle-class values and aspirations, but point out that many lack access to a peaceful and predictable social order. Leaders in these churches are convinced it is the churches' duty to act effectively on behalf of their constituents, both within and outside their congregational walls, to make the basic democratic and capitalist systems work for them. Generally avoiding protest and confrontation, they work within the system, seeking ways to expand opportunities.

Barnes United Methodist Church, in UNWA, has formed partnerships with a variety of neighborhood civic associations, working to develop greater influence in local decision making. Its recent growth in membership has paralleled the growth in the social outreach programs it has created. Barnes hosts a variety of programs for neighborhood children, including tutoring, nutrition, and sports. The pastor of Barnes spearheaded the recently formed Ten Point Coalition that united a dozen UNWA churches. The Coalition is an effort to collaborate with local police, juvenile justice systems, and welfare agencies to address gang, drug, and crime issues that have beset the neighborhood since the onset of middle-class flight in the 1960s.

We found notable examples of churches that embrace the pragmatic accommodationist approach. These churches have developed connections with both public and private institutions such as the Front Porch Alliance, the Interdenominational Churches for Educational Excellence, the National City Bank, Weed and Seed, several private foundations, the Indianapolis Parks, and some of the local public schools to provide joint human services support, training, and tutoring programs.



style of worship. What began as a salvationist street ministry evolved to include a food and clothing drive for the poor in the neighborhood. At our last visit, the church was poised to apply for non-profit corporation status to obtain grant monies for a job and educational skills training program for neighborhood families.

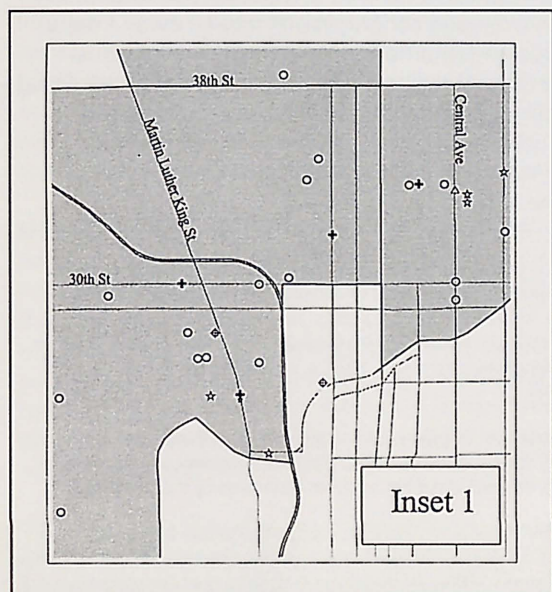
Redemptive nationalists, Franklin's third category, seek black control of core institutions, including economic institutions, within the black geographic and cultural communities. Its most extreme version embraces separation, as exemplified by the Nation of Islam. More commonly, however, such congregations have an ambiguous relationship to the status quo. They participate in the political system in carefully calculated ways, seeking to advance their particular interests while minimizing any future obligations or loyalties to secular civil authorities. These congregations focus inward on their own culture, in ways similar to immigrant ethnic congregations.

Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church in UNWA has created internal supportive institutions that serve its members as alternatives to mainstream institutions. These include the Mt. Zion Federal Credit Union, and a college scholarship program for the congregation's youth. The Mt. Zion Performing Arts Troupe presents interpretations of the African-American struggle

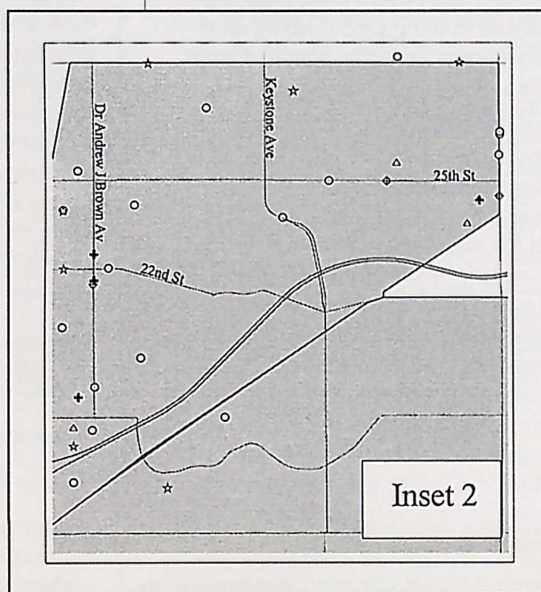
through music, pantomime, and dance. In one performance we observed, the message was clearly that black people have been tempted away from their African heritage and made subservient to the dominant culture through dependence on drugs. The solution offered was for blacks to separate from "foreign" cultures and unite against an unfriendly world.

Since the 1960s, some African-American middle-class congregations have developed the cultural characteristics of redemptive nationalists,

but without the commitment to black capitalism.⁶ These middle-class congregations celebrate black identity and have made it central to their worship and lives. They intertwine a diversity of cultural styles, reflecting both their European and African heritages, and seek new ways to connect Sunday worship to community service. In Coppin Chapel AME Church in UNWA, the congregation combines liturgical music with contemporary black gospel. Symbols of its biblical heritage are displayed in the church: a black Madonna and child and African characters from the Bible, including the mother of Rufu, Lucius



In some black congregations, the pragmatic, social orientation will fit comfortably with a revivalist orientation. Often this combination will evolve after a new church is founded on a mission of spiritual renewal. When confronted with the array of social problems in the neighborhood and the distressed personal circumstances of members, such congregations become advocates for expanding economic opportunities. An example in Martindale-Brightwood can be found in the two-year history of God's Restoration and Deliverance Ministries, a nondenominational storefront church with a vigorous Pentecostal



of Cyrene, and the Canaanite woman. The church draws on elements of African-American culture as models for addressing social needs in the Sons of Allen male mentorship program.

"The next generation of African-American men must be articulate, economically self-reliant, culturally sensitive, and most importantly, rooted in their relationship with the Lord," reads their mentorship guide. Rather than see the new forms of welfare partnerships offered by government as a pragmatic opportunity, the pastor expressed her misgivings: "These government initiatives always want something from the churches, but do not ask what the churches can offer."

The fourth and relatively new category of black religious expression Franklin calls *positive-thought materialism*. This group focuses on individual rather than group empowerment—on personal health, wealth, and success justified by a God who provides. According to Franklin, materialists position themselves opportunistically in seeking ways to use the system to advance their individual rather than community interests. While there are relatively few examples of this approach among the black churches of Indianapolis, the Covenant Community Church in the multiracial area of Crooked Creek shows tendencies in this direction. Much of this congregation is based in the ethos of the most affluent and upwardly mobile portion of the city's African-American population. The congregation makes good use of class-based social networks to provide information and services for members. It has a custom of inviting prominent local persons to act as "liturgists" once a month; Gov. Frank O'Bannon and his wife have participated several times. A stress management program for members has been initiated by the church, a service attractive to those holding professional and managerial jobs. The church provides only minor opportunities for community outreach activities.

Franklin's last category of congregations, *prophetic radicals*, are devoted to social justice; they call for sacrificial action on behalf of the common good. Beginning with the civil rights movement, black churches have taken leadership roles on issues of social justice, arguing for the application of universal Christian principles of equality, charity, and fairness to those disenfranchised and marginalized on the basis of race and class. Prophetic radicals critique American society by claiming that the basic structures of capitalism are the root causes of economic inequality and that unequal access to the political system undermines democracy. Globally, prophetic radicalism has been embodied in a variety of theologies of liberation for the poor, women, and Third World peoples. In this view, a radical transformation of both social institutions and individual hearts is necessary to correct current social ills.

We were not able to identify an Indianapolis congregation that represents this orientation today, though individual clergy and lay members continue the tradition. Fr. Boniface Hardin is founder and president of Martin University, an alternative form of higher education for disadvantaged adults located in Martindale-Brightwood. He was formerly the activist pastor of Holy Angels Catholic Church in UNWA. Today, he still preaches a liberationist theology, but no longer heads a local parish.

Concerned Clergy, a local coalition of black clergy and lay activists (with some white participation) criticizes the political status quo and demands accountability from government and

civic leaders. Concerned Clergy has been the most vocal about claims of police bias and as a result has attracted the attention of public officials. The group also actively supports political candidates and takes positions on issues ranging from the choice of school superintendent to ordinances controlling street vending. Individual clergy and lay members come together in this group to express their political views but do not necessarily represent the views of their congregations. One way political activism on the national and local scene has been channeled in recent years is through special interest groups such as Concerned Clergy.

Conclusion

There are many questions we could ask using Franklin's typology. Could these five categories be applied to predominately white congregations, and would the proportions in each be about the same as for black congregations? Do the congregations in the central city differ in their views from those in outlying communities? In the African-American community, is racial identity losing ground to class as a more powerful force in shaping congregants' religious, political, and social views?

It appears the social justice orientation, the moral drive of prophetic radicalism, has lost ground among African-American churches in Indianapolis in favor of a social service orientation. How and why have these congregations moved away from a structural critique and returned to a personal and individual focus? Is this a form of retrenchment? Or should we be looking for new developments emerging in response to today's economic and political conditions? These are some of the questions the Project on Religion and Urban Culture will be examining in the future.

¹ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1990, pp. 25-27.

² Bodenhamer, David J. and Robert G. Barrows (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Indianapolis*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, s. v. "African-American Churches" by Michelle D. Hale.

³ The Polis Center has been studying congregations in 17 Indianapolis neighborhoods since 1995, collecting demographic, historical, interview, and observation data from worship services and other activities sponsored by the churches.

⁴ Robert M. Franklin, "The Safest Place on Earth: The Culture of Black Congregations" in James P. Wind and James W. Lewis (eds.), *American Congregations Volume 2: New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, pp. 257, 259-260.

⁵ Robert M. Franklin, *Another Day's Journey: Black churches confronting the American crisis*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997, pp. 41-52.

⁶ David D. Daniels, "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me round:" The Politics of Race and the New Black Middle Class Religion," in *Public Religion and Urban Transformation: Faith in the City*. Lowell W. Livezey (ed.) New York: New York University Press, 2000, pp. 163-167.

Kevin Armstrong



Ron Sommerville

Joseph Tamney



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Photos by Rick Baughn

ROUNDTABLE

On July 19, Research Notes hosted a roundtable discussion at The Polis Center. Participants had been provided beforehand with the text of this issue of RN, and were invited to respond to the issues raised in the paper. Raymond "Ron" Sommerville is assistant professor of church history at Christian Theological Seminary. Joseph Tamney is professor of sociology at Ball State University. Elfriede Wedam, senior research associate at The Polis Center, wrote the paper under discussion. Kevin Armstrong is senior public teacher at The Polis Center. The following is an edited version of their discussion, which was moderated by Armstrong.

ARMSTRONG: Recently, President Clinton accepted an award from the NAACP. Someone who was interviewed afterward recalled Clinton's popularity with the religious community, saying: "The black church has seldom had as good a friend as Bill Clinton." Now, I suspect there are probably contradictory opinions to that, but politics aside, how is it possible that the black church—that is, the notion of a unified and similar body—still carries such weight in contemporary America?

SOMMERVILLE: Well, the rubric "black church" is hotly debated now, but the fact is that there exists an institution of African-American churches that have played an important role in the survival, empowerment, and liberation of black people in this country. We simply can't quibble about that. How we define it is problematic. But while there have been challenges to its legitimacy and authority in recent times, the black church remains a dominant, powerful institution in the lives of African-American communities and people.

TAMNEY: We did a survey of pastors in Muncie back in the '80s, where we looked at white conservative, white mainline, black, and Roman Catholic churches. The black churches supported justice issues, and they were similar to white mainline pastors and Catholics in this regard. On the other hand, they supported traditional positions on sexual and family issues—they looked just like the white conservative churches. I once suggested that the black churches could act as a bridge between the white mainline and the white conservative churches, having a foot in both places. And a black minister told me that wasn't his experience, that he felt alienated from both groups.

ARMSTRONG: You raise the question about black clergy who are part of the church but don't feel at home in white constituencies. What are the factors involved there?

SOMMERVILLE: Howard Thurman¹ said, and I will paraphrase, "Before I can feel at home in the world, I must find a particular place where I feel at home." Historically, the African-American church has been a kind of cultural womb, a spiritual haven for African-Americans in a hostile society. But this is a tricky issue when it comes to these typologies. On the one hand, you have typologies that emphasize the black church as being other-worldly in orientation, and at the other extreme you have a very politically active black church. What these typologies miss is the dynamic, fluid nature of African-American religion. What you see on a Sunday morning at worship may look apolitical or other-worldly, but under the surface it can be very political. The black church has been a home for self-affirmation, but also a base of operation. Historically, it's been the single most important institution in the lives of black people, there even before the family became a stable institution in African-American communities.

WEDAM: Ron, you point out that black congregations are more fluid than was expressed through this set of typologies. How can we see that better? One thing that was very strong in this set of churches was the combination of types—the pragmatic combined with revivalist was very common. There were several combinations that we could have made, and in truth, we went with Franklin's typology just for clarity's sake. Where I saw real change taking place was among middle-class congregations that were becoming more Afro-centric; that was not a typical pattern in the past and was not reflected in Franklin's typology. Also, I saw new institutions being built to respond to the realities of today: AIDS outreach, for example.

SOMMERVILLE: Let me respond by looking at my own congregation, Philips Temple CME Church, in terms of the typology. In that congregation of maybe 1,200 persons, I see every one of those types reflected. By far the most representative typology would be that of the *pragmatic accommodationist*, in terms of its engagement with the political structure. At the same time, this congregation is what some would call neo-Pentecostal, so they also reflect the typology of *grassroots revivalist*. There is a strong message for personal salvation, and members are encouraged to witness. Also there is a strong emphasis on self-help, middle-class values, entrepreneurial skills, so you could call us *positive thought materialists*. And then, when you look at the *prophetic radical* tradition of confronting racist structures and views, that's there. And the *Afro-centric*, the embrace of African culture and celebration of black history, that's all entwined in the services as well.

ARMSTRONG: For those of us who are reading this as non-sociologists, summarize for me: what do we miss when we use this particular typology, and what do we gain?

SOMMERVILLE: Let's face it, there is still a lot of religious segregation between the races. One of the things we miss is a full encounter with each other. So we have to rely upon impressions, anecdotes. The critique has been that black religion is overly emotional; it's somehow non-theological; it's all action. This is an underhanded way of saying it's not authentically Christian because it doesn't measure up to certain Western norms—that it's a cathartic experience for black people, compensating them for not having social privileges and economic clout. So we don't get to see the full expression of African-American Christianity, in terms of its ritual, its worship, and its social practice.

ARMSTRONG: Joe, what are we missing in this kind of typology?

TAMNEY: The continuum seems to go from bad to good, or good to bad, but the reality is that most churches are doing more or less the same things. The typology is based on a perspective that I like very much, but it's a liberal perspective. The prophetic category is loaded towards a 20th Century view of prophecy in terms of social justice. In a working-class society, justice is an issue that really attracts people; they may not be radical, but are talking in terms of fairness. When you move to a middle-class society, justice isn't where it's at any more, no matter what preachers say from the pulpit. People's day-to-day lives center on other issues, because they are fairly secure. So the environment is something they would talk about, or African culture.

WEDAM: I agree that the prophetic orientation reflects a working-class and poor background. My initial hunch about the pragmatic accommodationist style is that it reflects the move to the middle class. If I were to plot those churches on a map, I think I would find them to be clustered in middle class areas—or that the churches themselves would have a middle class population. Martindale-Brightwood is one of the poorest neighborhoods in Indianapolis, and I wouldn't expect to find a lot of pragmatic accommodationists there—as opposed to UNWA, which has more of a middle-class population. I think that class shift helps to explain a lot. Of course, it is challenging to the churches to say that their middle class members are no longer willing to ask questions about justice because it may not be relevant to their lives.

ARMSTRONG: You suggest that these categories can be beneficial to congregations internally to explore what their identity is, or their missions. What other benefits are there to using Franklin's typologies?

TAMNEY: It's always beneficial in sociology to use some kind of typology, so that everybody doesn't end up in the same category. As I see them, the categories say what is really important, which is the relationship between the congregation and society. The categories emphasize that aspect, and only that aspect, of what is going on in the church. For anyone interested in that aspect of congregational life, these categories are great.

ARMSTRONG: Ron, a historian's perspective?

SOMMERVILLE: From a historian's perspective, these categories are not very useful—for the reason that Joe just elaborated, and because African-American religious communities have manifested a protean character, based upon the social and economic realities of their color. Nat Turner was a prophetic radical, a mystic in many senses, whose profound encounter with God led him to attempt the overthrow of slavery. After slavery, the black church became much more accommodationist, especially in the South, where it was not expedient to be prophetic, or radical. Churches basically supported Booker T. Washington's view of accommodation. Later on, the black church became politically mobilized as a result of the migration to the North and the plight of African-Americans in urban areas. The nature of the black religious experience changes over time in response to social-economic crises.

TAMNEY: You can see that in the reaction to the 1960s. The civil rights movement is the last time I remember, really, pastors white and black getting involved—I mean, seriously, deeply, for a long period of time. That crisis ended, and that degree of involvement has ended.

SOMMERVILLE: At the same time, there were a lot of black churches who didn't support Martin Luther King—who had to be prodded and cajoled to support the movement. It would be wrong to assume that, even during the civil rights movement, all black ministers and black churches were suddenly prophetic radicals. Many were still accommodationists, or grassroots revivalists. Having said that, we can't underestimate the impact that the movement had on raising the consciousness of black ministers, and white ministers as well.

WEDAM: What I'm hearing is that the radical tradition is a very small one in the church, and that the civil rights movement was a blip on the screen—a major blip, but nonetheless it was not part of a trend of the church acting on society. That is, it was a departure from what the church position has been historically.

SOMMERVILLE: I don't agree. That is, I don't see the civil rights movement as an anomaly or blip. I think there were precedents for it in the prophetic radicalism that we see in slave revolts, and in the black independence movement within the church to move away from white denominations. Gayraud Wilmore² argues in his book, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, that radicalism is at the very core of the African-American religious experience. And although it ebbs and flows throughout the course of history, what he calls black radicalism is an insatiable quest for freedom and justice and equality. It gets expressed in different ways—sometimes in a tradition of just surviving against the indignities of a racist system.

ARMSTRONG: Does that mean prophetic radicalism is ebbing, or simply that Franklin's typologies are not adequate to measure prophetic radicalism?

TAMNEY: It's situational—it's latent. It is unrealistic to expect congregations, really, to be taking the political or civic leadership role here. Most of their time is taken up with maintenance work. But if an occasion arises where religious people and pastors can participate in a prophetic movement, they'll be there. Where the typology is off, I think, is in looking for churches that are continuously prophetic. That is not the role of churches in our society; the church's basic role is compensatory.

SOMMERVILLE: I think what Franklin is on to is that there has been some erosion of the authority and clout and legitimacy of African-American churches as the dominant social and political voices in the community. W.E.B. DuBois and others predicted that this would happen, as African-Americans became more acculturated and assimilated into the dominant culture—that other professions would arise and take a more visible role.

ARMSTRONG: We are still arguing here about religious identities being shaped more by social and economic factors than by racial identity. Is that true?

SOMMERVILLE: Well, can we really separate them?

ARMSTRONG: That's my question.

SOMMERVILLE: I don't want to make a sharp distinction between race and class, because I think they both matter. Yes, there has been an expansion of the black middle class and you see that reflected in Indianapolis, for example, when churches move out of the inner city into suburban areas and the townships. But if you ask black pastors what they are concerned about, the answers have to do with issues impinged upon by race: jobs, crime, and education, where there is the perception that African-Americans and other minorities are not getting a fair share.

WEDAM: Some people feel that the distinction between a social justice orientation and a social service orientation is probably overdrawn. And of course I make that distinction in this article, following Franklin. But in terms of outcomes, an individual working in a food pantry or a tutoring program might nonetheless have an effect that is transformative in the lives of the people being served, and that does address questions of justice.

SOMMERVILLE: Franklin and others who have been strongly influenced by the civil rights movement really want to push black churches toward transforming their notions of service from mere charity, to a more systemic emphasis on development and empowerment of community. Churches involved in providing services may see these forms of ministry as social justice activity. But it is, from a broader perspective, a limited way of dealing with these issues. I don't think there could be many churches that are not doing anything in the community.

WEDAM: Actually, there were a few, but not a large number.

ARMSTRONG: Elfriede suggests in her paper that the generally conservative or moderate orientation of black churches in Indianapolis is consistent with the local culture. What's your take on that?

TAMNEY: In a recent survey in Muncie, which isn't that far away, we asked ministers in 98 white Protestant churches, "What is the political orientation of your congregation?" We didn't find any that said "liberal." Zero. The distribution was between moderate and conservative. The Unitarian Universalist minister did say liberal—

ARMSTRONG: So conservatism transcends racial identity. Is that the culture of this area?

TAMNEY: You will find more within the black community willing to say "moderate." I doubt if you would find many who would say their congregation is liberal.

SOMMERVILLE: I have been intrigued, since coming to Indianapolis, by how conservative/moderate the African-American religious population is here, as well as the leadership. I have nothing empirical to base this on, but I think that it has to do with the dominant political culture. Again, this suggests to me that African-Americans adapt to the larger political and social climate. I have probably met more black Republicans here, even among clergy, than anywhere else I have been, in the South, and in the North. Now there has been a shift now back to the Democratic Party, at least in the mayoral election. Bart Peterson³ strongly courted the black vote. Is this going to lead to a resurgence of black participation in the political process?

ARMSTRONG: If it is true that black congregations have been accommodating to the prevalent culture, why is the Sunday morning hour still the most segregated hour? If so much is shared in common, congregations ought to be more integrated—but they're not.

SOMMERVILLE: That is why I say class is more than one issue, and that race remains a divisive phenomenon. But the other part of that is—and Franklin I think does a good job on this in his discussion of Afro-centrism—African-Americans still feel at home in these churches. Until the dominant culture comes to grips with the fact that these are places that black people strongly identify with, then we are not going to understand the gravitational pull of and commitment to these congregations.

WEDAM: What that really gets at is the difference in worship styles of black and white congregations. A sociologist used the term "ritual inclusion" to express this notion. It's more than a style—it's a ritual culture. Until people can talk to one another across those differences, it will be hard to have more multi-racial congregations. But there are significant movements to create opportunities for dialogue across race in this city. Crossroads Bible College holds a multi-racial ministry conference every other year, and they've had some very effective classes and presentations that give black and white participants a chance to speak honestly about their sense of difference, their sense of alienation, and their needs.

ARMSTRONG: Whose agenda, then, drives this notion that multi-racial congregations are the desirable form of worship?

WEDAM: Well, I do think there is that sense that "multi-raciality" is the way to overcome the sins of the past. That's not my word; I copied it from someone else. But it does not speak to, in fact, the emotional and cognitive needs of people in worship.

SOMMERVILLE: This gets at what Lincoln called "the continuum between the universal and the particular." In African-American churches, the emphasis is on the universal gospel, that the gospel is for all people and the church is to include all people. The grassroots revivalists preach this; they believe this. At the same time you see, because of the history and social location of black people, this emphasis on the particularity of race—which is not only an ideology of protest but an embrace of one's heritage and culture. So now, we have statements that you can be unashamedly black and Christian at the same time. You don't have to give up your culture. You don't have to assimilate. You can stay grounded in the church of your upbringing, because now it means much more than just low social and economic status.

ARMSTRONG: Last thoughts, comments?

TAMNEY: The term "multi-racialism" came into existence because changes were already taking place. If you go to charismatic white churches, most will affirm their multi-racial attitude.

And they act out the things they say from the pulpit. I talked to a white family that had adopted a black child. They visited several churches, but felt at home at this charismatic church because there was a public attitude of acceptance. So it has on the margins, as it were, some long-term, actually significant consequences.

WEDAM: Overall, this approach to the study of the black church is clearly a limited one. This is a way of capturing the political orientation of the black church, but it doesn't capture the fullness of the styles and the content. I am certainly interested in knowing what additional questions we should be asking that would help us understand the variety of the black church community.

ARMSTRONG: Well, we'll listen a bit more closely every time we hear someone in the media assume there is one "black church." Thank you all very much.

¹ Howard Thurman (1900-1981), African-American minister, educator, and civil rights leader.

² Gayraud Wilmore, civil rights leader and professor emeritus of church history at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia.

³ Bart Peterson, mayor of Indianapolis.

RESEARCH NOTES

from
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