The Past, Present & Future of the Black Church in Spokane

By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
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This past September, during a debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, NBC moderator Lester Holt asked them both what they would do to improve race relations in our nation. Both their responses, as far as I'm concerned, missed the mark and continue to trouble me. Clinton gave a politically safe answer by saying everything without saying much of anything. She talked about the need to "restore trust between communities and the police," as if such trust has ever existed to begin with in Black communities. She talked about making sure police are using the best techniques and equipment, and are "trained to use force only when necessary." She said she's laid out a plan for criminal justice reform, the details of which she didn't go into. She recognized the "many good, brave police officers who equally want reform." And she talked about the "gun epidemic" and "getting them out of the hands of people who should not have them."

Trump, though more crudely, pretty much said the same thing, criticizing Clinton for not wanting to use the term, "law and order." He went on to refer to a "situation where we have our inner cities—African American, Hispanics—are living in Hell because it's so dangerous. You walk down the street you get shot… I'm saying where is this? Is this a war-torn country? What are we doing?" His solution to stopping all this violence, he said, is to "bring back law and order." He suggested doing so by increasing "stop and frisk" policies, taking guns away from the gangs of illegal immigrants roaming our streets shooting people, and said we "have to be very strong and vigilant," because right now our police are afraid to do anything, and we need them to "protect our inner cities because African American communities are being decimated by crime."

Needless to say, there's much about both their responses that disturbs me. But for our purposes today, let me just point out that the question presented them was about race relations in our country, not the disturbing number of unarmed black men being killed by police that are finally being exposed by cellphone cameras and social media. Yet in their responses, they both seemed to reduce the problem of race in our nation to just that, a problem between the police and, what Clinton called, "their neighborhoods," and Trump referred to as, "inner cities—African American, Hispanics." They said little to nothing about the New Jim Crow, about the many ways our pervasive and historic practice of institutional racism continues to prevent African Americans especially, as well as other minorities, from fully participating in the benefits of our society by accessing quality neighborhoods, jobs, education, healthcare, and political power. Perhaps, more disturbing and important to point out is that both Clinton and Trump were utterly resigned to the reality and inevitability of what I will simply call, Black neighborhoods, or, perhaps better put, neighborhoods segregated by institutionalized race-based economic practices and policies.

True, 400 years of racial inequality and segregation in America has led the most oppressed among us to develop subcultures, including amazing art, dance, and music, and other forms of creative expression that must be celebrated and preserved. Perhaps this is no truer of anything than it is of music. Without Black culture, we would not have the old Spirituals, Ragtime, the Blues, Jazz, Gospel, R&B, or Rap, all forms of cultural response to oppression, inequality, and injustice. So, yes, we need, as a larger society, to celebrate our diversity, and to sustain and support cultural uniqueness. Nevertheless, I look forward, if only in my dreams, to the time we can finally liberate our entire society from institutional, economic, and political segregation. I dream about the day we no longer have white neighborhoods, and black neighborhoods, and Latino neighborhoods, and Asian neighborhoods, and poor neighborhoods, and elite neighborhoods, and just have American neighborhoods that reflect our rich cultural diversity; and I dream further still, to a time we simply have human neighborhoods in which all people, wherever they are from, not matter their beliefs or ways, can be beloved friends, good neighbors, and social equals.

For we must remember that today's segregated neighborhoods, outlined by poverty, race, and inequality, are rooted in a pervasive and entrenched system of institutional racism. And let me be clear about what I mean by institutional racism, which is different than being racist. There are many racist in our country, individuals who hate anyone who isn't white, but who are powerless, thanks to our laws, to act upon such hate. Yet there are many others who are not racist at all but engage in racism every day because we are all part of a racist system. As a white person it has been relatively easy for me to obtain a quality education and earn a living wage, to send my kids to good schools and doctors, to feel relatively confident they won't end up in prison, to choose which neighborhoods and which parts of town I'll live in, to get loans and credit from banks, and to drive down the street, maybe even get pulled over now and then for a traffic infraction, without fear I'll end up in jail, or maybe even dead.

We imagine this kind of segregation took place in the past, in the South, but it began long ago and remains well institutionalized right here in Spokane, Washington. Unlike surrounding states, Washington had unusually progressive laws early on, including the passage of an 1890 Civil Rights law allowing Blacks to access public services and accommodations, preventing racial discrimination, and allowing integrated schools and mixed marriages. This was a huge draw for several Blacks who were among the first pioneers to settle in Spokane. Unfortunately, our progressive laws didn't reflect the social reality Blacks living in Spokane would face then and continue to face, in many ways, today.

One of the most difficult challenges that has always faced Blacks living in Spokane is they represent an extremely marginal percentage of the population, far less than the 13 percent national average. In 1890, there were 19,367 Whites in Spokane and only 190 Blacks, less than one percent.[1] That number hasn't changed a lot over the decades, getting as low as .5

[1] Mack, Dwayne A., *Black Spokane*, University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, USA, 2014, p. xix.

percent between 1920 and 1940, and as high as 2 percent in 1990, which is where it remains today.[2] According to the most recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau, of the 213,000 people living in Spokane, there are only about 4000 Blacks. This means Blacks in our community don't represent a significant voting block, unlike those living in most the country, and, thus, often have their needs overlooked and requests ignored by our local political leaders. This further implies there is even greater impetus upon all people of good conscience in our community to make certain we demand our politicians attend equally to then needs of all our citizens, especially those on the demographic fringes.

Despite our State's relatively progressive antidiscrimination laws, furthermore, was the cold reality of hate, prejudice, police brutality, and institutional racism that has existed in Spokane from the get-go. Although some legally owned property and their own businesses, their numbers remained too marginal to make much of an impact, and the undercurrents of White supremacy were always present. Even by 1950 there were still no Black doctors, lawyers, engineers, or public schoolteachers in Spokane, and the unemployment rate for Blacks was 29 percent compared to just 1.5 percent for Whites.[3] "During the 1940s," according to historian Dwayne Mack, "black males most often worked in service-oriented position, such as janitors, porters, waiters, bartenders, and counter workers. Blacks also worked as chauffeurs, bellhops, and busboys, and coat and hat checkers in such white-owned establishments as the State Theater, Spokane Club, and the Old National Bank."[4] Black women mostly worked in private households as maids and such, but also got work as cooks, laundry washers, bartenders, counter workers, and the like.

In many cases, they weren't allowed to patronize the very businesses they worked for. Again, as Mack explains, "Just as in the South, blacks—older residents, newcomers, visitors alike—were denied service at most white owned hotels, motels, restaurants, department stores, barbershops, beauty parlors, real estate offices, employment agencies, and nightclubs."[5] They were often met with business signs stating, "We Won't Serve Colored."[6] And even if they were allowed into a business, whites were always served first, even if Blacks were in line ahead of them. Unlike white women, Black women weren't allowed to try on clothes before purchasing them in local department stores. And Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, and Paul Robeson were among the many famous black entertainers barred from hotels while performing in Spokane.

During World War II, many Blacks entered the military as part of what was called the "Double 'V' Campaign," victory against Fascism in Europe, and, winning the hearts of Americans through service to their country. Needless to say, the campaign failed miserably. Black

[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid., 21
[4] Ibid., 23
[5] Ibid., p. 38.
[6] Ibid.

soldiers returned to their communities, including here in Spokane, only to find the same level of hate and intolerance they'd left. When Carl Maxie arrived home from the War, still dressed in uniform complete with his medals and ribbons, the white worker at the bus depot's restaurant refused to serve him, saying, "Get the hell out of here!"[7]

Maxie, who went on to become Spokane's great African American Civil Rights Attorney, often credited with ending legal segregation in the Inland Northwest, and, I'm proud to say, a member of our Church who once served as our Board President, wasn't alone in his experience. In fact, the 1,200 Black soldiers stationed at Geiger Air Field during the War were assigned menial work and given quarters separate from white soldiers. Nor were they allowed to leave the base to go into the city. If they did, they were subject to being arrested and brutalized by the police. They were, in effect, kept as virtual prisoners by the very community they were fighting for.

Perhaps one of the most detrimental and long lasting injustices has been the impact of Spokane's practice of Red Lining, meaning there were written and unwritten policies preventing Blacks from living anywhere worth living. According to a 1946 article in the *Spokane Star*, a Black weekly newspaper it was difficult for them to find anything but, "rundown and third rate dwellings that had been abandoned by whites and remodeled to be used as apartments."[8] Although some were allowed to purchase homes in areas throughout the city, so long as their character was vouched for by a white person, Blacks weren't allowed to cluster beyond the eastside, which is, thus where the black neighborhood developed. The Spokane Reality Board's National Code of Ethics prohibited realtors from, as it read, "introducing into a neighborhood a character of property of occupancy, members of any race or nationality, or any persons whose presence will be detrimental to property values in that neighborhood."[9] In other words, they weren't allowed to sale or rent to blacks if doing so would harm property values. The Code of Ethics goes on to call doing so, "unethical."[10] Mortgage companies, additionally, refused to extend loans to Blacks, all of which left twenty percent of the local Black population with no choice but to move into the City's poorly constructed housing projects.

I say these policies and practices are the most detrimental and long lasting, because the higher rates of poverty in the neighborhoods most Blacks in our community still live in, persists today, and, as a result, fewer young black men and women today have the benefit of inheriting wealth from the increased equity of their family homes. Either the values didn't rise much, or their parents and grandparents didn't own property to begin with.

[7] Ibid., p. 42.
[8] Ibid., p. 44.
[9] Ibid., p. 45.
[10] Ibid.

It's important to understand this troubling history to grasp the vital importance of Black churches in Spokane. Today we tend to think of churches as our spiritual homes, where, at best, we go to receive emotional support in times of trouble. But when you live in a larger society that takes almost everything from you, your dignity, your political power, as well as adequate housing, work, health, safety, and the basic freedoms to simply exist and go where you wish, the church becomes everything!

Way back at the turn of the 20th century, Calvary Baptist Church, the first Black church in Spokane, established in 1890, and Bethel African American Methodist Episcopal Church, established in 1901, served most of Spokane's Black community. But they weren't just dishing out sermons and solace. "Besides providing spiritual guidance," Dwayne Mack writes, "Spokane's black churches also helped new black residents acclimate to an unfamiliar environment. Members of various black churches welcomed newcomers to the city by helping them find housing. More importantly, they directed them in behaving properly in public and in avoiding businesses that discriminated against blacks."[11] According to Mack's excellent book, *Black Spokane*, upon which I've depended for most the historical details I've highlighted today, the black church "also served as an unofficial welfare agency."[12]

Together, Calvary Baptist and Bethel A.M.E., among other budding Black churches, maintained a "Sinking Fund," to help people pay their delinquent bills and buy food in hard times. They prepared and gave away Christmas baskets for families with financial difficulties. They used their church basements as social centers, hosting dances and carnivals, for black youth who didn't have anywhere else to go. They cooked and sponsored dinners every week to make certain the poorest among them could eat. They helped their members find gainful employment. Other Black support organizations, like the Booker T. Washington Community Center, women's clubs, and fraternal lodges, all got their start in these Black churches. They also became havens for promoting and preserving African American art and culture. Sometimes they even gave loans for purchasing property when the Banks refused.

So, yes, the Black church has served as a place of spirituality and solace for its members, but equally as important, it has served as employment agency, realtor, bank, cultural center, and provided other welfare and social services when there's been nowhere else to turn. Dr. King once spoke about a time he felt he had nowhere to turn and was ready to give up the entire Civil Rights movement. "I am at the end of my powers," he said, "I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."[13] But then he turned to his faith and found, what he called, "the power that can make a way out of no way." It was then, he realized he could carry on his important mission, because he wasn't alone. "It seemed at that moment," he said, "that I could hear an inner voice singing to me, 'Martin Luther stand up for righteousness, stand

[11] Ibid., p. 9f.
[12] Ibid., p. 10.
[13] King, Martin Luther, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.* Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1986, 1991, p. 509.

up for justice, stand up for truth and lo I will be with you even to the end of the world!'" As a Baptist minister, Dr. King naturally took this to be, in his words, "the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on... He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone, no never alone, no never alone, he promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone!"

This morning, I hope it has become clear, that African Americans in our community have also never truly been alone because of their faith, because of the enduring and vital presence of Black churches in Spokane that continue to support them in the most difficult of times. Today, racist attitudes have again begun to rear their despicable heads, and as institutional racism persists, it is up to all of us, to our church, Black and White, gay and straight, rich and poor, to stand together with all who are oppressed, to remind them, they aren't alone, no never alone.

And so, I have asked my dear and good friend, the Rev. Percy "Happy" Watkins, of the New Hope Baptist Church, which has been a vital part of our community since 1957, to join us today. Happy has been the minister of New Hope for more than 25 years, and is a beloved and respected member of the Spokane community. A few weeks ago, Happy treated me to breakfast, during which he told me of his plans to move his church to a new location where it can better continue to serve the community. New Hope is currently located in a small converted pool hall, with only 10 parking spaces. So they've sold that property for $40,000, which they've put as a down payment on a larger, newer facility at the former Valley Landmark Missionary Baptist Church. It sits on a third of an acre, has 2,400 square feet of space on two floors, multiple offices, classrooms, 3 ADA compliant bathrooms, and a 200-seat sanctuary. Happy admitted he isn't sure how, but now they need to raise approximately $200,000 to pay for their new church home.

So, given that Happy is a Baptist, and I'm a former Southern Baptist, I'm going to end today's sermon with a bit of an alter call, by asking you to consider supporting this move and the vital ministry of the Black church in Spokane. I've told Happy I'm confident there is enough appreciation and respect for his good work in our community, that together we ought to be able to find the resources New Hope needs to thrive, and that I would be honored if he would allow our church to kick off the effort with today's service. Peggy and I are going to give $100 a month for a year, which won't detract from our pledge to this church, and, if necessary, will do the same next year too. If you can contribute, you can do so by visiting our Social Justice table in the back of the room after the service, or by letting Happy know in our receiving line, or by going online at newhopespokane.com to contribute directly. So if you can, my hope is that you will join me in helping New Hope Baptist make a way out of no way, and our African American friends, neighbors, and selves, know that they are never alone.