

1

African-American Church as Community

The [African American] church community . . . a nation within a nation

—E. F. Frazier (1974)

The African-American church is one of the few institutions where class boundaries tend to break down, where education boundaries are deemphasized, where regions are spanned, where African Americans from almost all walks of life are accepted. Although there are surely differences between urban and rural churches, between large and small churches, between historically, independent African-American churches (African Methodist Episcopal [A.M.E.], Congregational Methodist Episcopal [C.M.E.], National Baptist, Inc., etc.) and African-American churches within predominantly White denominations (United Methodist, United Church of Christ, etc.), those differences are not strong enough to alter the identity of the African-American church either as an institution or as a community.

Because the African-American church is the setting for this study, this chapter focuses on this institution as community, thus providing a broader context from which to examine the individual church communities introduced in chapter 2. Included in this discussion is the situating of the church in African-American communities culturally, intellectually, and historically. The discussion also touches on the components of the church that build that community, including participants, artifacts, and behavior, rules, and customs.

SITUATING THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHURCH

As scholars of African-American culture have consistently pointed out, in African-American communities the church holds a role of prominence unrivaled by any other institution (Hamilton, 1972; Smitherman, 1977). Smitherman stated that “the traditional black church is the oldest and perhaps still the most powerful and influential black institution” (p. 90). Religious scholar C. Eric Lincoln (1974), emphasizing the impact of the church on Black people, states that “[their] church was [their] school, [their] forum, [their] political arena” (p. 6). Lincoln asserted that “whether one is a church member or not is beside the point in any assessment of the importance and meaning of the Black church” (p. 115); its influence spreads further than its walls.

Historically, the African-American church has been more than just another institution. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) asserted that the “church is the cultural womb of the black community” (p. 8), and as such, “most of black culture is heavily indebted to the black religious tradition, including most forms of black music, drama, literature, storytelling, and even humor” (p. 8). It is because of its place as the center of Black culture that African-American churches cannot easily be separated from secular institutions and that sacred-secular distinctions are complicated.

Paralleling Lincoln and Mamiya’s argument, Paris (1985) called African-American churches the “custodians of the black community’s most basic societal values” (pp. xii-xiii). He argued that “black churches have had a prominent role in shaping, maintaining, and enhancing social order and communal solidarity” (p. xiv). At the heart of Paris’ argument and Lincoln and Mamiya’s as well is a belief that there is an African-American worldview that is the foundation of African-American communities. This worldview is rooted in African-American religious tradition; yet, it permeates the fabric of everyday life in African-American communities; it is the heart of Black culture. Many current scholars in the social sciences and humanities describe this worldview of African Americans as having an “Afrocentric perspective,” a perspective deeply embedded in an African worldview (see Asante’s, 1980, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* and Myers’, 1988, *Understanding the Afrocentric Worldview* for an introduction to afrocentricity). This worldview is labeled *Black Christian tradition* by Paris (1985), *Black sacred cosmos* by Lincoln and Mamiya (1990), and *soul theology* by Mitchell and Cooper-Lewter (1986). Lincoln and Mamiya explained that

the Black sacred cosmos or the religious worldview of African Americans is related both to their African heritage, which envisaged

the whole universe as sacred, and to their conversion to Christianity during slavery and its aftermath. . . . Black people created their own unique and distinctive forms of culture and worldview as parallels rather than replications of the culture in which they were involuntary guests. (p. 2)

In his most recent work discussing African worldview, Paris (1995) argued the following:

Africans brought their worldviews with them into the diaspora and, as a result of their interaction with their new environments, their African worldviews were gradually altered into a new-African consciousness. As a result of the influence of traditional African cosmological thought on each, important continuities of moral thought and practice exist between African Christians in the diaspora and those on the continent. (p. 24)

Paris chastised scholars who dismiss what he saw as strong links between the “African American experience and the African factor” (p. 19). In discussing African cosmological thought, Paris turned to the work of African religion scholar Mbiti (1975) for support. Mbiti detailed features of African religion that Paris suggests become part of the African diasporic worldview. Specifically, Mbiti’s research pointed to an African belief in a supreme deity whom Mbiti identifies as God. He also importantly pointed out that God was known by many names in Africa, a point that one of the ministers in this study addresses (see chap. 4). Paris suggested that the multiple names may have led to Christian missionaries’ belief that most Africans were polytheistic and to their errant goal of introducing God to Africans, ignoring that God was already known to them.

Pitts (1993), a sociolinguist who did an ethnography of African-American Baptist churches in central Texas, went even further in exploring the influence of an African worldview and demonstrated that worldview’s influence on religious practices. In his study, Pitts identified rituals within these central Texas baptist churches that he connected to the African diaspora. Pitts argued that the “Afro-Baptist ritual is an extension, as well as an interpretation, of African religion custom” (p. 9). One such ritual that Pitts identified, going into trances, is, he argued, rooted in West and Central Africa.

These scholars suggest that although this worldview is tied to religion, its impact is far reaching. Because I share this assumption, I see discussion of any aspect of African-American culture—be it religion, language, or literacy—being connected to this worldview. An illustration is the work of literary scholar Hubbard (1994) who

offers a hermeneutical discourse on the modes of religious expression that developed out of the African encounter with the New World and [investigates] how these modes of expression have been transformed into scribal tradition and have influenced the structure as well as the theme of selected works of black American prose fiction. (p. 18)

Hubbard recognized the “African factor” (African worldview) in African-American religious expression and analyzes that factor’s influence in African-American literature. Hubbard’s work illustrates how an African worldview permeates not only African-American religious practices and beliefs but also other aspects of African-American culture such as literary practices. Thus, he pointed to an African worldview as a constant and important context for understanding the cultural artifacts that emerge from African-American communities. I highlight this topic of worldview because it carries such import for African Americans as a community.

CHURCH AS COMMUNITY

In the past, we have often considered community only as a group of people who live in a common area. Community as a concept, however, has grown considerably past that usual and narrow definition. We now talk of professional communities, discourse communities, scholarly communities, home communities, and church communities. In many ways, community as defined by common history, common beliefs, and shared understanding is more prominent than common living area. In my thinking about situating the African-American church within African-American communities, I have come to see the church as a community itself—not as individual church communities that I address in chapter 2, but as a broader cross-locational concept of community. Conceptually, the African-American church is a body of people with a common history of, among other factors, slavery, oppression, faith, perseverance, and literacy. If we take into account the argument about worldview advanced by Paris (1985, 1995), Mitchell and Cooper-Lewter (1986), Lincoln and Mamiya (1990), and others, then the church is a body of people who share beliefs, religious and otherwise, and who have a shared understanding of their world.

This emergence of the church as community took root it seems during slavery and its aftermath. Both Pitts (1993) and Paris (1995) cited the importance of the secret meetings of slaves as precursors to the African-American church. Pitts linked the origin of the Afro-Baptist church to these secret meetings: “secret meetings were held under the

auspices of powerful political, legal, and economic units called secret societies" (p. 36). Paris suggested that the process of "Africans in the diaspora making Christianity their own" (p. 39) occurred during the secret meetings of slaves that "became the locus for the development of an alternative understanding of the Christian gospel" (p. 39).

In an earlier work, Paris (1985), in discussing this emergence of the church, stated the following:

those nascent black churches evidenced the cooperative action of slaves to build institutions and prove to themselves and others that they were capable not only of adapting to an environment but of constructing a world of their own. In time, the black churches were destined to become a surrogate world for black people in general. (p. 6)

This construction of church as a "world of their own" symbolizes the church as community. The identities of its members were tied to this community, as were and are rules and expectations that govern social and moral behavior. Just after slavery in the rural south, the church as community was all encompassing. Frazier (1974), a noted historian, captured the essence of the African-American church as community as he explained the following:

outside of the family, the church represented the only other organized social existence. The rural Negro communities in the South were named after their churches. In fact, the Negro population in the rural South has been organized in "church communities" which represented their widest social orientation and the largest social groups in which they found an identification. Moreover, since the Negro was an outsider in the American community it was the church that enlisted his deepest loyalties. Therefore, it was more than an amusing incident to note some years ago in a rural community in Alabama, that a Negro when asked to identify the people in the adjoining community replied, "the nationality in there is Methodist." . . . For the Negro masses, in their social and moral isolation in American society, the Negro church community has been a nation within a nation. (p. 44)

The most useful and comprehensive characterization of the African-American church comes from Lincoln and Mamiya (1990). These scholars suggested that this African-American church community is characterized by a set of dialectical tensions centered around six pairs of poles. Their model of the church is a dynamic rather than static one that shifts with the changing social demands. Lincoln and Mamiya argued that any particular African-American church may lean toward one

orientation on this continuum rather than another, but any church may exhibit tendencies from both ends of the continuum. The six pairs are as follows:

1. The dialectic between priestly and prophetic functions: *Priestly functions* involve only those activities concerned with worship and maintaining the spiritual life of members. Prophetic functions refer to involvement in political concerns and activities in the wider community.
2. The dialectic between other-worldly versus this-worldly: *Other-worldly* means being concerned only with heaven and eternal life or the world beyond. *This-worldly* refers to involvement in the affairs of this world, especially politics and social life, in the here and now.
3. The dialectic between universalism and particularism: As ethnic institutions, the historic Black churches reflected the dialectical tension between the universalism of the Christian message and the particularism of their past racial history as institutions emerging out of the racism of White Christianity and the larger society.
4. The dialectic between the communal and the privatistic: The *communal orientation* refers to the historic tradition of Black churches being involved in all aspects of the lives of their members, including political, economic, educational, and social concerns. The *privatistic pole* of this dialectic means a withdrawal from the concerns of the larger community to a focus on meeting only the religious needs of its adherents.
5. The dialectic between charismatic versus bureaucratic: As an overall generalization, the majority of Black churches and denominations tend to lean toward the charismatic pole of the continuum, especially when compared to White mainstream denominations and churches that tend to have more bureaucratic forms. (The charismatic pole has the charisma of the church leader, namely the minister as more important than the organizational structure and form.)
6. The dialectic between resistance versus accommodation: The pole of accommodation means to be influenced by the larger society and to take part in aspects of it, however marginal that participation may be. . . . Resistance means affirming one's own cultural heritage, in this case an African-American or Black heritage.

These tensions are not either-or choices. The church can have a balance between the poles or it can move toward one end of the pole or the other in response to several factors or social changes. Hence, this dialectical model can accommodate the challenges that the urban church must face and yet still be within the tradition of African-American churches. I must note here that there may be more than six pairs of dialectical tensions that characterize this community. Lincoln and Mamiya made no claims to exhausting the list. However, for the purposes of this study, I refer to this dialectical model throughout my discussion of the individual church communities in the chapters that follow. The dialectical tensions that Lincoln and Mamiya have identified become important contributions to the discussions of literacy in African-American churches because they provide insight into factors that determine the kind of community settings within which African-American churches are situated. These tensions are backdrops for a detailed discussion of components of the church as community. Two key components that I highlight in the remaining sections of this chapter are the role of the minister, a major participant, and the sermon as a genre, a major artifact.

THE ROLE OF THE MINISTER IN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHURCH

It has been my experience, in both small rural southern African-American churches and large urban African-American churches, that across church communities, the central and most influential figure is the minister. In many instances, the African-American minister is the central leader not only in the church but also in the larger community. And, as I demonstrate in this book, the minister is a major participant in literacy events that emerge from African-American churches.

One way to understand the role of the African-American minister was proposed by Paris (1995), who connected the lifestyle of many African-American ministers to African culture through the concept of African kingship:

Among freed African Americans, the spirit of African kingship was transmitted to the clergy, whom the community viewed as their primary leaders imbued with charismatic powers. . . . From the earliest times up to the present day, African American clergy have been acknowledged as the titular heads of their local communities and have enjoyed the highest respect and loyalty of their people, who care for their material needs and often bestow lavish gifts on them and their families. (p. 60)

Although this characterization may be less true today, we need only look at the most vocal and visible African-American persons in this country (and even religious leaders of African descent around the world) to see that the church still produces important leaders. Reverend Jesse Jackson, a Baptist preacher, was a candidate for the Democratic nomination for president of the United States in 1988 and 1992. Minister Louis Farrakhan's major support comes from the followers of the Nation of Islam, a nonmainstream yet legitimate religious movement in the United States. Finally, Ben Chavis, former director of the NAACP and now member of the Nation of Islam had been a long time pastor in the United Church of Christ (UCC) denomination. These men have used their positions as religious leaders to address social, economic and political issues, a role that is not new for African-American ministers. (Of course, I refer specifically to the men listed here, not ministers as men generically. A growing number of African-American churches are pastored by women. Most of the scholars I quote from directly regrettably use the male pronoun to refer to preachers.)

Traditionally, it has been the preachers' role to be the spokespersons for the African-American community. Lincoln (1970) provided the following insight:

by tradition, the Black preacher has always enjoyed the status of being the natural leader of the black community. His leadership role has at times assumed a variety of forms with concomitant responsibilities: pastor or spiritual leader, political leader, social leader, and very often the leading proponent and exemplar of education. (p. 6)

Historian Carter G. Woodson (1921) referred to African-American preachers as "the best developed leaders among their people" (p. 169). Woodson also said that "the Negro preacher is granted more freedom of speech and permitted to exercise more influence than any other Negro in his community" (p. 169). What Washington (1984) said of African-American Baptist ministers can be extended to African-American ministers in general. Washington stated of the minister's role that,

no less important is the position of the Baptist minister as the news medium of the community. He is expected to gather the local news and circulate it through his sermons on Sunday. In fact, almost all ministers in Southern Negro communities are looked to as the disseminators of information, and the pipeline of the community leads directly to them. (p. 2)

As the scholars cited here have indicated, the multiple and influential roles of African-American preachers in church, local, and broader

communities is virtually unparalleled by any other figure. It is no wonder then, that they are prominent in any discussion of literacy in African-American churches.

THE ROLE OF THE SERMON IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHURCHES

Mitchell's *Black Preaching* (1970), although 30 years old, is still the most complete description of African-American preaching. Mitchell characterized African-American preaching and focuses on the features of the African-American sermon throughout his book. Those characterizations can be condensed to two major points:

1. Black preachers must preach in the language and culture of their people no matter how educated the preachers are. This is referred to as the vernacular.
2. Also, the preacher must address the contemporary man and his needs. (p. 29)

Mitchell adhered to the doctrine that African-American preaching takes place only in dialogue and commented on the role of the congregation in "making the dialogue a normal part of the black preacher's sermon" (p. 95). This call-response pattern in African-American sermons—the dialogue—has been well documented (Holt, 1972; Miller & Vander Lei, 1990). Mitchell characterized the dialogue as that which occurs when a member of the congregation responds "because he identifies with something the preacher has said . . . he is at home, he is interested in what the preacher is saying because he is involved, crucially involved in the issues as the preacher shapes them with scriptural reference and skillful allegory" (p. 97).

Critically important to any variety of African-American preaching is a strong sense of community. African-American preachers must create a sense of community between themselves and their congregations. Mitchell stated that through the sermon, "one has to establish a kind of intimate fellowship" (p. 185). Speaking the language of the people provides the means for establishing that rapport. Hubbard (1994) suggested that "the preacher's voice becomes the collective voice of his people. . . . Through his speech acts, he provides the vehicle by which the entire community of faith may participate in shaping its own history and in restructuring cultural memory" (p. 14)

What then are specific characteristics of the African-American sermon? Mitchell (1970) warned that because of the emphasis on individual style and variation, it is almost impossible to give an outline

of the typical African-American sermon; however, he did conclude that most African-American sermons contain illustration, storytelling, African-American language and style, and climax. Furthermore, Mitchell (1970) stated that the African-American preacher's sermon must contain the "word of God," which basically means the sermons are usually tied to the Bible by incorporating Scriptures within the sermon, being built around Scriptures, or both. Many African-American sermons feature Bible stories woven into the text or as the major part of it. Mitchell (1970) discussed other features of the sermon that he labeled *stylistic*:

1. The use of rhythm in preaching.
2. The use of intonation.
3. The repetition of words, phrases, sentence patterns, aphorisms, and so on.
4. The use of role-playing and other storytelling techniques.
5. The personal involvement of the minister in what she/he is preaching about.
6. The minister's ability to play with language, to give the congregation the "well-turned" phrase.

This list is by no means exhaustive, but it does reflect what generally characterizes the African-American sermon. Spillers (1974), in an analysis of three sermons by Martin Luther King, found that "the minister weaves analogy and allegory into the sermon, comparing and juxtaposing contemporary problems in morality with and alongside ancient problems in morality" (p. 77). Jones (1976), who called the sermon "the peak place in the African American worship service" (p. 7), listed characteristics of the African-American sermon that are quite similar to those listed by Mitchell and Spillers. According to Jones, in African-American sermons, one finds "parallelism, emphasis on experiences which parallel biblical events, symbolic language, imagery, alliteration and an absence of inhibition with respect to speaking the truth" (p. 7).

THE SERMON GENRE AS A SPEECH EVENT: RHETORICAL AIMS

In addition to looking at specific features of African-American sermons as an important factor in comprehending African-American sermons as a literacy event, it is equally important to examine the overall rhetorical purposes of sermons as a genre. Placing the sermons that I examined for this study within the context of a larger genre creates a clearer picture of

how the sermons in this study should be viewed within the local church communities from which they emerge, within African-American church communities, and the broader theological community. It is the work of scholars of this latter community on which I call to provide insight into the rhetorical aims of the sermon as a genre.

Hymes (1972, 1974) listed genre as one of the components of the speech event. We tend to think of genre in a literary context as the formal features of a type of discourse. When we think of genre this way, many times we divorce it from any kind of context. But when we look at genre as part of an event, as Hymes did, then context and form are not divorced. The speech event includes more than just the discourse. In examining characteristics that mark the sermon as a genre it seems best to begin by highlighting some stated goals or aims of the sermon. For those who believe, as I do, that form and function are dependent on each other and that the goals or aims of a message help define the communicative event, this is an important starting point.

Homiletical scholars devote much attention to the rhetorical aims of the sermon. And, as I illustrate in the following chapters, the rhetorical aims of the ministers and their sermons have a major impact on the nature of this literacy event. What follows is a brief summary of that scholarship. Achtemeier (1980) argued that the goal of all sermons and preaching is to transform the lives of the listeners by bringing to the listeners the action of God supported by the biblical Word through human words. Erdahl (1976) stated that "a sermon seeks to share a life-changing message" (p. 47). Both Achtemeier and Erdahl pointed to one broad persuasive goal of the sermon: to change people's lives through a message. Massey (1980) viewed the sermon as having many varied goals. Massey stated that, "a sermon can be preached to offer a solution to a problem, or to instruct in an essential doctrine, or to prescribe a cure for some spiritual or social ill; it can be planned to support a cause, or to sustain hearers and keep them on their feet while living under pressure" (p. 18). Although Massey's aims seem, at first, far more pragmatic than Achtemeier's or Erdahl's, it becomes clear that Massey viewed the goals of the sermon on two levels. On the one level, Massey (1980) discussed the "realistic goals of informing, persuading, encouraging, reminding, sustaining, and giving" (p. 18). On the other level, he acknowledged that "the ultimate goal in preaching is to connect the hearer with the grace of God, and nurture that hearer in the life that grace makes possible when it is accepted and regarded in full" (p. 18). What these different goals seem to show is that most sermons have multiple rhetorical aims, both pragmatic and somewhat more global or spiritual. Yet, each aim can be described within the realm of the rhetorical situation: speaker, listener, message, and purpose. Although a pragmatic rhetorical aim may change from sermon to sermon, the spiritual aim remains consistent.

This consistency seems to be reflected in the types of sermons that homileticians and theologians discuss. Mays and Nicholson (1933) identified three types of sermons: those that focus on contemporary everyday situations, those that focus on doctrinal or theological issues, and those that focus on life after death. Achtemeier (1980) identified several types of sermons: thematic (themes imposed on a text), narrative (retelling a biblical story), running commentary (movement through a biblical passage *seriatim*, interpreting as the preacher goes through the text), and experimental. Under thematic sermons, Achtemeier listed two subtypes: topical sermons that usually deal with contemporary worldly issues and doctrinal sermons that usually deal with theological issues. Under experimental types, Achtemeier (1980) included what she called "first-person testimony." However, she advised that first-person statements and personal narratives should be avoided as much as possible in the sermon. This is a suggestion that seems to conflict with practices in the African-American church where first-person narratives and personal testimony are valued.

Although Massey's (1980) list of sermon types may have different names than Achtemeier's, they are similar in content. Massey identified what he considered the basic types of sermons according to their popularity. He identified the most popular form as *topical*, matching Achtemeier's "thematic" sermons, where a "theme or topic controls the sequence" (p. 21). The next most popular sermon form is *textual*, "a form of design determined mainly by the divisions or sequences of thought in a single text or short passage from scripture" (p. 21). Massey called a third sermon form *expositional*, "the design of which is determined basically by an extended passage of Scripture" (p. 22). Massey's expositional type is very similar to Achtemeier's "running commentary" sermons.

Craddock (1979), who took a novel approach to sermon forms, believes that "the separation of method from content is not only artificial but unfruitful," and that "forms of preaching should be as varied as the forms of rhetoric in the New Testament, or as the purposes of preaching or as the situations of those who listen" (p. 53). Craddock stated, however, that instead of dominant sermon types, there are two dominant directions in which a sermon moves. The most traditional he called *deductive movement*.

Homiletically, deduction means stating the thesis, breaking it down into points or sub-theses, explaining and illustrating these points, and applying them to the particular situations of the hearers. (p. 54)

This method strongly resembles the traditional academic essay.

Craddock promoted the second type of movement—*inductive*—which can be traced to Aristotle. Craddock stated that “in induction, thought moves from the particulars of experience that have a familiar ring in the listener’s ear to a general truth or conclusion” (p. 54). This inductive movement also requires that the sermon rely on a large amount of shared information between preacher and congregation. For Craddock, one of the advantages of the inductive sermon is that “there is no single pattern or structure” (p. 145). He attacked the monotonous form of the “usual outline.” What seems to stand out in this discussion of the sermon genre are the multiple rhetorical aims of the discourse and the basic agreement among biblical and theological scholars about what those aims as well as the sermon types are.

Other features mark the sermon in the African-American church. First and foremost, sermons are usually biblical. That is, no matter where a sermon topic is derived, a sermon’s content must be based on biblical Scriptures. This characteristic seems to be a constant for all ministers and parallels what Mitchell said is expected of African-American preachers’ sermons. In fact, some call for sermons to be more “biblical” (Davis, 1958; Thompson, 1981; Willimon, 1981). Another common feature of sermons is the one sentence central idea or thesis. In terms of surface features, most sermons are framed by a Bible scripture at the beginning and a prayer at the end.

I have noted these features of the sermon with emphasis on African-American sermons because they are important in any consideration of discourse patterns in such sermons. The features not only describe the sermon as a genre but emphasize the importance of not overlooking the fixed aspects of the sermon. These are features that may transcend any categorization of sermons as oral or written, and that inform all of the sermons examined later in this study.