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## What I Learned from Black Churches

**W**hen I began my journey as an urban pastor, I was not yet two months past my graduation from Baptist Bible College. I was as green as could be and knew of no other white boy doing what I thought God was calling me to do, namely pursuing the building of an urban, multicultural church. I soon realized that the black church was a model for many of the things I needed to know and do. God has afforded me immeasurable help in the trackless wasteland of urban ministry through observing and relating to black churches. Come to think of it, there is help here for everyone.

### Unashamed!

It is hard not to notice that black believers have a witness wherever they are — on a corner antiviolence march, in city council chambers, at a community meeting, or in a meeting with business people or politicians. They are not ashamed of their Christian identity. They don't try to finesse, cover up, or water down who they are. They identify with Jesus, pray to Him, pray in His name, praise Him, and constantly allude to His Word as the standard to be pursued and the path to be followed. From this I learned to just be who I am and not try to smooth the message out to make others at ease in the presence of spirituality.

### Get Your Praise On!

Anybody who knows anything about the black church knows they know how to "have church." The idea of worship as a holy party seems to have escaped much of Anglo Christendom. Black believers come to church expecting to celebrate, expecting to raise a shout, expecting their spirits to be lifted, expecting to

rejoice. They don't need a script. While some preachers have to cajole or manipulate people for a response, I've often seen black pastors trying to quiet their congregations. I don't have to piece together obscure texts to find some biblical footing here. There is ample scripture given over to exuberant praise and many exhortations for us to do the same.

### We Shall Overcome!

Because I have pastored in the inner city for years, I have a bit of understanding of what the black church has had to deal with — crowded conditions, no parking, old buildings, intense socioeconomic deprivation, redlined by the banks, high crime rates, and disconnection from power bases. The black church didn't just survive; it thrived in America's center cities. They believe God is all-powerful. His Word is true. God does answer prayer. All things are possible. They trust that the gates of hell cannot prevail against Christ's church.

### Celebrate the Truth!

While some may revel in long and pointless explanations about an obscure rule of grammar or textual emendations, the black church was more about understanding God as sovereign, getting excited about it, and celebrating the applications of truth. While the text must be explained and taught, certainly there is plenty of room for balance in rejoicing in the truth and its relevance.

### God on the Corner!

Anyone who knows any American black church history understands the whats and the whys behind the local church existing as the center of the culture and the community. It was natural that the

church became the base from which issues in the immediate community, the city, and beyond were addressed. It was the idea that the church really is an army — that a standard of righteousness needs to be lifted up. Evil needs to be addressed in force and en masse. While one person here or one person there may not be heard, an army of people committed to the same cause is difficult to ignore. In the black church, I have seen many examples of God's people rising up, motivated by God's truth, speaking with God's voice, being salt and light. Their incarnational, proactive approach has been very helpful to me.

### Everybody is Somebody!

Because the black church was the one social structure permitted for many years, they learned how to find a place for everybody. Hence, the co-chairs, the co co-chairs, the vice-vice presidents, the executive vice presidents, the assistants to the assistants, the junior deacons, and the junior usher board. There was a place for everyone and a means by which to affirm everyone's place and service in the body. Furthermore, church was a place to celebrate a member's achievement in school, work, and the community. What a great practice to celebrate life progress in the household of faith! It affirms that my Christian life encompasses home, school, work, and church and is not isolated to a single day or address.

In the black church, I see urban believers separated from power and resources standing in primitive faith in the God of heaven and earth, thriving as spiritual families, impacting their communities, glorifying God, and showing me how to do church in a difficult place.