



From Black Church → to New Thought

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What **New Thought** Can Learn from the **Black Church**

No experience in America quite matches the traditional Black church on a Sunday morning. The roof-raising music, the sermon exhortations, the dancing and sometimes fainting. Not every church is the same, but most often, African customs brought over by the enslaved combine with music and messages that resonate with a community who often feels marginalized.

Many Black ministers and church members who are now part of the New Thought spiritual movement grew up in these conservative Christian churches. They remember them fondly and still miss elements of the church services, especially the music. So why did they leave? What have they found in New Thought—in churches such as Unity, Centers for Spiritual Living, and the Universal Foundation for Better Living—that serves them better?

In this booklet, our writers remember the pros and cons of the Black church and tell why and how they came to New Thought. You'll discover they have not abandoned their roots. Instead they've learned the two can be integrated through music, teaching, and prayer in creative ways that speak to nearly everyone.

We hope this booklet informs and enlightens readers as it reveals how blending experiences from the Black church has been strengthening New Thought through these remarkable leaders.

Your Friends in Unity

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A group of African American gospel singers, both men and women, are performing in a church. They are wearing matching maroon robes with red trim. The women are in the foreground, singing with their eyes closed and hands raised in praise. The men are behind them, also singing. The background shows a church interior with large religious paintings on the walls and warm lighting from candles or lamps. The overall mood is one of spiritual joy and worship.

MUSIC



Joy and Justice

REV. DINAH CHAPMAN

Raised in the African-American Pentecostal tradition of the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), I did not exactly leap into New Thought overnight. It was more like a 20-year spiritual evolution. COGIC was of course foundational to my formation and gave me a tremendous sense of spiritual community and belonging, provided a safe space, and gave me a deep and abiding love for God, scripture, prayer, and, yes, gospel music.

My upbringing was filled with preaching and music. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and my dad were both preachers. Their leadership and preaching on love stuck with me. During the civil rights rallies and marches of the 1950s and '60s, I recall hearing music from Mahalia Jackson, the Freedom Singers, and the Staple Singers, to name a few. My mother loved gospel music, and it played in our house all the time.

In 1969, the music of Edwin Hawkins (from COGIC) crossed over to the pop charts. His hit “Oh Happy Day” began playing all across the U.S. The music of Andraé Crouch, the Clark Sisters, Walter Hawkins,

and many more followed. Years later I learned that Dr. King gave his last “mountaintop” speech in the COGIC headquarters auditorium in Memphis, Tennessee, where I had sat during many services at our annual convocations. History was being made all around me and right in the church. This is where joy and justice came together for me.

By the '70s I ventured into charismatic churches, but what never left me was my joy of singing and my gospel roots.

A few more years went by and I found Unity. I moved to California in 2000 and got a fresh new start. At my Unity church, I returned to focusing on my music and spiritual enrichment and education. One day I met with my minister and asked how to approach the ministerial path. I shared with her the call to ministry I had felt way back in college, and it was not only for music.

At the 2012 Unity People's Convention in Detroit, Michigan, I felt the call to go on to seminary. In my first year, I enrolled in a class based on the book *Creating a World That Works for All*, taught by the author Sharif Abdullah. It was timely because the shooting death of Trayvon Martin was still very much in the news. There didn't seem to be much conversation around social justice in Unity circles. To me, the world did not seem to be working well for unarmed Blacks. So I worked wherever I could: on MLK Day planning committees, at a convention luncheon, and facilitating Authenti-Speak, a discussion forum on inclusivity and diversity at Unity Village.

I knew I wanted to do more. Justice, equity, and inclusivity work had become the areas that chose me. I thought I would create an alternative ministry about joy. But one day it occurred to me, *Why not do both—justice and joy?*

I led an all-day inclusivity training for the Unity West Central Region and a few other centers. But interest seemed to cool until the murder of George Floyd in 2020. That year it was uplifting to find this quote in Barbara A. Holmes' book, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*:

Joy beckons us not as individual monastics but as a community. It is a joy that lives as comfortably in the shout as it does in silence. It is expressed in the diversity of personal spiritual disciplines and liturgical rituals. This joy is our strength ...

This helped pull it all together. Yes, I'm a child of the Black Pentecostal tradition that was there for me in my youth, and I've had contemplative practices all along, such as the soulful *yes* praise that masses of us would sing at our annual convocation. It's still relevant and reverent for me. I can also add meditation, affirmative prayer, and go into the Silence, if I so choose. It's all rich and sacred, holy ground.

Today we need this exuberant joy *and* we need justice to roll down like water. Joy provides a sanctuary moment for us anytime and anywhere. So along with the chorus of the many prophetic voices, I will continue to work for the beloved community and for a just world, for divine love, peace, justice, and joy. In the meantime, you might still hear me clapping on the two and four, shouting *hallelujah*, *amen*, and *namaste*. It's a both/and.

Rev. Dinah Chapman is a Unity minister in Northern California who is researching spiritual practices related to joy and justice for a doctoral degree. She is a diversity and inclusion workshop facilitator and singer/songwriter.

Song of the Soul

REV. KATHY BEASLEY



Growing up in the Black church, I was immersed in a world where faith, culture, and community were set to music that seamlessly blended a unique spiritual experience. The rhythms of gospel music and the soulful melodies weren't just sounds to me; they were profound expressions of devotion that stirred something deep within me. These musical expressions were more than mere notes; they were the spiritual heartbeat of our community, connecting us in a shared experience.

The Black church of my youth, with its vibrant traditions and spirited refrains, was where I felt a profound sense of belonging. Its rich

history—rooted in African traditions and fused with elements of blues and jazz—was a testament to resilience and hope. It conveyed stories of struggle and triumph, echoing the journey of a people who had faced adversity with unwavering faith.

As I journeyed through life, I sought a deeper understanding of personal and practical spirituality that transcended the confines of any single tradition or shared experience. This quest led me to New Thought's philosophy, emphasizing universal principles and affirmative prayer. Here in New Thought, I discovered a profound Truth that resonated with my soul: the recognition of the divine essence within us all.

The convergence of Black church music and New Thought spirituality expanded the expression of my worldview in ways I couldn't have anticipated. I now understand that spirituality isn't confined to a single path but can simultaneously embrace various teachings and experiences. It is a revelation that has enriched my life and deepened my appreciation for the interconnectedness of all creation.

If ever there were a soundtrack of the soul, it is for me the moment that the music of the Black church, with its jubilant hymns and heartfelt spirituals, became a metaphor for the human journey—a journey marked by trials and triumphs. It reminds me that faith and music are universal languages that have the power to transcend cultural boundaries. These songs, whether sung in a traditional church or the context of New Thought gatherings, carry a message of hope and resilience, reminding us of our innate ability to overcome what is before us by calling forth what is within us.

I have found a harmonious resonance in the blend of Black church music and New Thought spirituality. The music becomes the bridge,

connecting the cultural richness of my upbringing with the study of Truth principles. It is a constant reminder that spirituality is a personal and ever-evolving journey that can draw wisdom from diverse sources while honoring the authenticity of our individual and communal experiences.

Reflecting on my journey, I am grateful for the powerful blend of faith, culture, and music that shaped my upbringing in the Black church, and I cherish the insights gained through New Thought. The harmony of the two has taught me that our spirituality is a vibrant tapestry woven from various threads, each contributing to the rich outpicturing of our lives.

My journey has been more than a transit from one point to another, but a way of being all I know myself to be, demonstrating a sense of wholeness where nothing is broken, devalued, or left out. The melodies that once echoed through the brick-and-mortar sanctuary now find resonance in the rhythm of my thoughts, intentions, and beliefs. The foundation of faith and community nurtured within the Black church remains a cornerstone of my spiritual identity.

At the same time, the principles of New Thought have expanded my expression of the Divine and the boundless potential within us all. In essence, the melodies of the past continue to reverberate as I embrace the power of the present. My journey reminds me that New Thought spirituality is an ongoing exploration enriched by a willingness to blend all of who we are, our experiences, and our expressions to create a unique fusion of faith powerful enough to become the song of my soul.

Rev. Kathy Beasley is senior manager of the Unity Prayer Ministry and associate minister at Unity of Central Florida in Orlando.



Soul Music Then and Now

REV. VERNELLE NELSON

The evolution of soul music—music that feeds the soul—corresponds with the history of Africans in the Americas. Even though the enslaved were not always able to understand the various languages and dialects, they could relate to the feelings stirred by the drumbeats and sounds from other handmade instruments that reverberated through the night air.

As enslaved people were introduced to Christianity, they used music to tell their stories in their own unique way. During slavery, religious-themed music often had more than one meaning. Many of the songs

that were learned and sung during religious services were used to send messages from one plantation to another, signaling danger or alerting the enslaved to opportunities to escape. When you listen to the lyrics, the song “Steal Away to Jesus” was clearly an invitation to join escapees, as was “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.”

Many of the tunes sung by enslaved people and people of African descent before the Civil War, during Reconstruction, and in the Civil Rights era are songs like those composed by Charles Albert Tindley. He was born into slavery in 1851 and composed some of the most enduring songs of hope and survival of the 19th and 20th centuries. His most popular composition is “We Shall Overcome.” He also wrote “We’ll Understand It Better By and By,” “The Storm Is Passing Over,” “Stand by Me,” and many more.

Perhaps the most prolific composer of gospel music was Thomas A. Dorsey, born nearly 50 years after Tindley. He wrote gospel classics like “Precious Lord, Take My Hand,” “It’s a Highway to Heaven,” “Old Ship of Zion,” “The Lord Will Make a Way Somehow,” “Peace in the Valley,” and “If You See My Savior.” For the most part, Dorsey’s compositions were optimistic, hopeful, and focused upon peace, celebration, and joy. I had the blessing and honor of meeting him in the late 1980s. He was one of the most gracious, humble people I ever encountered. Dorsey’s aura was so powerful that everyone in the room seemed transfixed by his presence. It was years later that I was able to fully realize the light and the power of God that literally emanated from this gentle man.

As people of African descent moved beyond a consciousness of beseeching to claiming our truth, religious and spiritual music evolved as well. The Staple Singers, the Rance Allen Group, and the Edwin Hawkins Singers gained popularity in the 1970s with songs that elevated the consciousness of listeners to not only claim but declare their divinity. Songs like “Ain’t No Need of Crying,” “Goin’ Up Yonder,” and “I’ll Take

You There,” which were popular in churches and dance clubs alike, changed the tone of church music in a major way.

A notable shift in gospel music began to take place in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Artists like Yolanda Adams, Take 6, The Winans, Kirk Franklin, and the Clark Sisters came onto the scene with music and lyrics that elevated the collective consciousness in the Black church community far beyond the limits of previous decades.

The 21st century ushered in a new crop of gospel artists who share New Thought messages with nearly every song they produce. Tasha Cobbs Leonard released “Break Every Chain” in 2013. The opening line, “There is power in the name of Jesus to break every chain ...” says it all. Hezekiah Walker’s songs “I Need You to Survive” and “Every Praise” are used in many New Thought churches and centers, including Unity of Melbourne, Florida, where I serve as senior minister. One of my personal favorites is “Miracle” by Mumu Fresh, a.k.a. Maimouna Youssef. If you haven’t heard it yet, you are in for a treat. She sings, “Your miracle is waiting on you, but it can’t come ’til you’re ready. So baby, what you gon’ do?”

Today, Rickie Byars is the best-known, most prolific African-American producer of New Thought music, but there are countless others. Among them are Eddie Watkins Jr., composer and performer who appeared at the 2023 Unity Worldwide Ministries Convention. As time goes on, we will hear from many more.

Rev. Vernelle Nelson is senior minister at Unity of Melbourne, Florida, and the founder of Unity Golden Life Ministries in South Florida.

Spirit-Filled Music for Everyone

STEPHANIE BLAND

Music woven into the fabric of the Black Baptist church has been my greatest inspiration. I come from a long line of Black Baptist preachers, including my father, my mother’s brother, and her two sisters’ husbands. My mother and one of her sisters served as ministers of music in their respective churches. My parents and their siblings were part of a gospel singing group known as the Choraliers that performed at churches and other events throughout Chicago. After school, my siblings, cousins, and I did our homework while the Choraliers rehearsed.

Our whole family gathered regularly at my grandmother’s house where we ate, sang, prayed, and laughed. It was a family ritual. My siblings and I sang in church choirs and three of us took weekly piano lessons. There was never a time when music was not part of my life.

When I enrolled at Baker University in Kansas, I intended to major in medical research. I had never considered a possible career in music until I attended a student meeting to identify our enthusiasms and strengths. Inspired to pursue my passion, I earned bachelor’s degrees in music education and instrumentals for grades K–12 then began teaching music at schools in the Kansas City area. I was attending Unity of Lawrence, Kansas, where Rev. Darlene Strickland’s sanctified religious background was similar to my Baptist upbringing. Rev. Darlene introduced me to Rev. Gloria Lilly-Holt, and the three of us

formed a music trio and sang at Unity churches and events throughout the Kansas City area.

I learned from the two of them to apply the traditional teachings we grew up with to the New Thought principles. We all missed the gospel music that had been a staple in our churches. In the Unity tradition, musicians tended to prefer singing everything as written. In the traditional Black church, we allow Spirit to guide the natural rhythm and flow of the music that is already in us. Done properly, the expression of Black gospel music can be married to the Unity teachings. It then becomes music to the ears and a feast for the eyes as the movements of the director, singers, and instrumentalists engage in an aural and visual dance that moves body and soul.

With the influence of Revs. Darlene and Gloria, we engaged audiences with spirit-filled music across venues from Baptist to New Thought. If I can summarize in one word the difference between the music I grew up with in the Black Baptist church and what I've experienced in many Unity churches, it would be *spontaneity*. The music of the Black church is often spontaneous. On the fly, a soloist, pianist, organist, or even a preacher might just play or sing a few notes. The next thing you know, the entire church resonates in song. I have found there is a hunger in many Unity churches for such an experience—a balance of old-time spirituals and gospels with traditional anthems and hymns. I enjoy combining the music experiences of my Black Baptist upbringing with the positive path for spiritual living that Unity brings.

Stephanie Bland has taught music for elementary and high school students for more than 35 years and has served as music director for numerous Unity churches and events. She is vice principal at Hogan Preparatory Academy in Kansas City, Missouri.

PRAYER





Prayer: The Common Denominator

REV. GAYLON MCDOWELL

My maternal grandmother was considered a prayer warrior among her peers, family members, and friends. She was the product of what she called the sanctified church, which I now understand to be a conservative version of the Pentecostal denomination of Christianity. She carried herself as a prayerful and sanctified Black woman. My grandmother spoke to me often about how her prayers, Bible study, and singing old spirituals and gospel songs helped her survive and maintain her sanity while growing up during the Jim Crow era in Mississippi.

People would often visit my grandmother for prayer. Those she prayed for often received incredible results. I recall hearing about healings and breakthroughs from family members and friends who went to her for prayer as well. She even started a weekly prayer meeting. During these meetings, I found myself picking up women who had fainted on her living room floor—“slain in the Spirit”—because the Holy Spirit was moving through my grandmother so strongly when she prayed.

There were many times my grandmother would drag my older sister, Lisa, and me to several churches on Sunday. We would watch her pray, sing, and play the piano for the various ministries. Although I seldom wanted to go to all those churches, and even begged my mother to intervene, I was exposed to prayer, worship, and singing at an early age.

Prior to my preteen years, I stopped attending church with grandma. Simultaneously, my mother joined a new church. Mom’s church had a fantastic choir and while I had no idea what they were teaching, their choir and the praise and worship made a strong impression on me.

During the latter part of my teenage years, I began questioning some of the basic tenets of fundamentalist Christianity. I didn’t question the existence of God or prayer, rather I was seeking answers about life that my upbringing hadn’t answered.

When I was 20 years old, my mother asked me to play a cassette tape on my stereo while she cooked. The tape was of the motivational speaker Les Brown preaching at his home church, Christ Universal Temple in Chicago. I was very impressed by his sermon. Eventually, I heard a tape of the founder/minister of Christ Universal Temple, Rev. Johnnie Coleman, D.D. This is when my mind was enlightened. Her New Thought message answered most of my questions, so I began attending her church.

Less than a month after attending Christ Universal Temple, I was having difficulty breathing and was rushed to the hospital. Earlier that day, I had taken medication that activated a dormant asthma and nearly caused me to die. I remained hospitalized for about five days. Upon my release, I was required to stay home for an additional two weeks.

REV. JOHNNIE COLEMON, D.D.



I held two New Thought books in my emergency room hospital bed and told my mother, “Ma, according to these books, I don’t have to have this if I don’t want it.” She looked at me and knew I was serious. When my grandmother visited me in the hospital, I assured her that I was going to be fine and completely healed.

Now I had a better way to understand the prayer power I witnessed as a child. This deeper insight was due to the New Thought lessons I had learned in the short time I was attending services in a New Thought church, along with the books I was reading.

I wanted more, so I began to read three to five New Thought books a week. I created denials and affirmations that I affirmed multiple times each day. I attended every Sunday service and didn’t miss one class. I affirmed the “Prayer of Faith” by Hannah More Kohaus, sometimes 20 times a day, until I received a complete healing within months of my health experience, with no relapses to date. The “Prayer of Faith” includes the line: “God is my health, I can’t be sick.”

I now realize that my upbringing with my grandmother and mother, coupled with all those gospel songs and prayers I heard as a child, paved my way to New Thought. My church background assisted my realization in the power of God in everyday life. When I found Christ Universal Temple, I was still able to enjoy powerful preaching, music from a dynamic choir, and prayer and worship in a New Thought context. I healed my body and transformed my life through the power of prayer.

Rev. Gaylon McDowell is the senior assistant minister at Christ Universal Temple in Chicago.



Before and Forever After

REV. CAROL J. HUNT

In my *before* picture, I knew all about Jesus and prayer. I had a double seminary degree and was working at a United Church of Christ as director of Christian education, responsible for curriculum for young people and adults. I trained volunteer teachers for each age group and conducted Bible classes.

Then in the mid-1980s, a friend I had met during a 6 a.m. Bible study group focusing on theologians invited me to listen to a tape on prayer by a minister I did not know. His name was Eric Butterworth (already, by then, a legendary Unity minister and author). Trusting her judgment, I listened and decided this minister did not know what he was talking about.

Surely I knew what my position entailed, which included prayer, how to pray, and all its component parts. Prayer after all was front and center to the Christian experience. Every Christian patterned their prayer on Jesus, whom I accepted as my Lord and savior at age 16.

I believed that Jesus was sent by God into a world of sin because every human being was born in sin. No one was acceptable to God because of original sin. Jesus was sent to take unto himself the sins of humankind and give himself as a sacrifice to save us. By accepting Jesus, I can remember to this day how I personalized John 3:16 in the New Testament. “For God so loved Carol that he gave his only Son, so that should Carol believe in him, Carol may not perish but may have eternal life.”

Jesus as the second in the Trinity became my direct link to God for the salvation of my soul. In any prayer I would pray Jesus went before me as my entryway to God. Because I accepted this for myself, I had dedicated my life in Christian service to everyone who would listen, study, and accept Jesus as I had.

Listening to Eric Butterworth turned this belief on its head. I was listening to a man assert that God was not “out there” to pray to, but “in there”—inside of me. I was not to pray *to* God but pray *from* God in me.

The idea was outlandish! If true, everything I had been taught from Sunday school to college was a lie or misinterpreted. Impossible!

My friend encouraged me and my husband to attend Unity services at Lincoln Center in New York City, where Butterworth lectured. “Listen

to him before making a judgment,” she said. I listened for almost a year before leaving the traditional Christian church and making Unity my spiritual home.

Deciding to leave the traditional Christian church began my *forever after*. One personal issue for me was leaving gospel music. I thought long and hard and determined the music was forever in my heart—and what I was now experiencing enhanced it.

- For the first time in my life, I was responsible for my growth as a spiritual being.
- For the first time in my life, I understood that my thoughts create my experiences.
- For the first time in my life, I learned that the Bible is not the history of the Hebrew people but the history of humans’ unfolding consciousness of God.
- For the first time in my life, I knew that the *Christ* in Jesus’ name referred to his divinity and that I was a divine being too.
- For the first time in my life, the scriptures became everyday practical lessons.

My *forever after* led me to become a licensed Unity teacher, an ordained Unity minister, and founder of Harlem Center for Practical Christianity, a.k.a. Unity in Harlem.

Rev. Carol J. Hunt is the minister at Unity in Harlem, New York. To learn more about Eric Butterworth, visit ericbutterworth.com.

Prayer Is the First Resort

REV. KAREN R. SHEPHERD



It all began for me in West Virginia at the Winona United Baptist Church and Mount Chapel Missionary Baptist Church in Ansted, two tiny churches in two little “coal camps,” towns built around the coal mining industry. My mother hailed from Ansted, my father Winona—14 miles apart. The churches were a central meeting place in both locations.

I do not remember much about services except that I had to be as quiet as a church mouse. There were many references to God as the man in the sky. Be good or God will get you! Prayer was begging and pleading to meet your needs. I used to hear my grandmother say she would “worry the Lord” about some condition.

When I was 8, we left West Virginia for Cleveland, Ohio, and a much bigger church, but the experience was not much different—lots of fire and brimstone. When I was 18, I stopped going. I had had enough.

Five years later, I was attending a yoga class at a local Unity church and a friend gave me a subscription to *Daily Word*. Thus began my path in Unity. I soaked up the teachings and became active in the church.

The main difference between Unity and my previous churches was the emphasis on affirmative prayer instead of begging. I participated in a two-year prayer practitioner program in which our final project was to tie together what we had learned. I began mine like this: *I believe in the power of prayer.*

The last part of my presentation consisted of a picture I had drawn that depicted a rocket taking off. The part that represented the earth had rocks glued to the bottom. I came to see it as fuel for transformation.

Charles Fillmore said, “All down the ages [humanity] has been making the spiritual effort to realize conscious union with that innermost center where Truth in all its glory abides eternally. This realization can be accomplished only through true prayer.”

This statement brings to Unity students the realization that properly practiced prayer can bring us healing, prosperity, and better human relations; in fact, it can remake our lives. One of the greatest lessons

we can learn is that true prayer is creative, active, and forceful. It causes things to occur, and it changes conditions. We do not pray to change God; we pray to change ourselves. God is eternal, limitless, and unchanging.

We often hear someone say of a problematic situation, “We will just pray about it.” The word *just* implies that since they think they can do nothing, they will “just pray” and hope that God will heal the condition. Prayer is their last resort. But in fact, prayer is a method of first resort. Pray first, then act as directed based on the guidance received.

Prayer does not consist of simply hoping for desired results. Prayer is communion with God, with divine wisdom, love, substance, and power. When we commune with God, we place ourselves in the great stream of creative life that will bring us wisdom, love, understanding, and all we need to solve life challenges.

As we form the habit of using the power of prayer, we manifest answers to life’s minor or most significant problems or, most important, we find the solutions to our issues.

Rev. Karen R. Shepherd leads Unity Good Shepherd Ministries, an alternative ministry near Cleveland, Ohio.

It Is All Truth

REV. KAREN SAUNDERS



REV. RUTH M. MOSLEY, D.D.

I was reared in the Christian Science faith. At a young age I knew I could be healed through prayer. It wasn’t until I began taking ministerial courses through the Unity Urban Ministerial School that I learned Christian Science was considered a branch of New Thought like Unity. In fact, Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science, and Charles and Myrtle Fillmore, founders of Unity, studied with the same teacher in the beginning.

I recall, when I was a young girl, my mother going to visit a prayer practitioner or calling the practitioner on the phone when we had a health challenge. I suppose it wasn't much different from people visiting Myrtle Fillmore or writing to her for prayers for healing. Thus, when my mother and I began attending West Side Unity Church in Detroit, Michigan, founded by Rev. Ruth M. Mosley, D.D., it was like coming home. To me, Unity taught the same ideas as Christian Science on a more understandable level.

What I have come to understand is Truth is Truth is Truth, regardless of which religion is teaching it. As an instructor for the Urban School, also founded by Mosley, I have had the opportunity to teach a course called History of the African-American Church. Listening to lectures on African spirituality to prepare the class, I heard the same principles outlined that we teach in Unity. The nature of God was described as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. God is love and we are love as God's children.

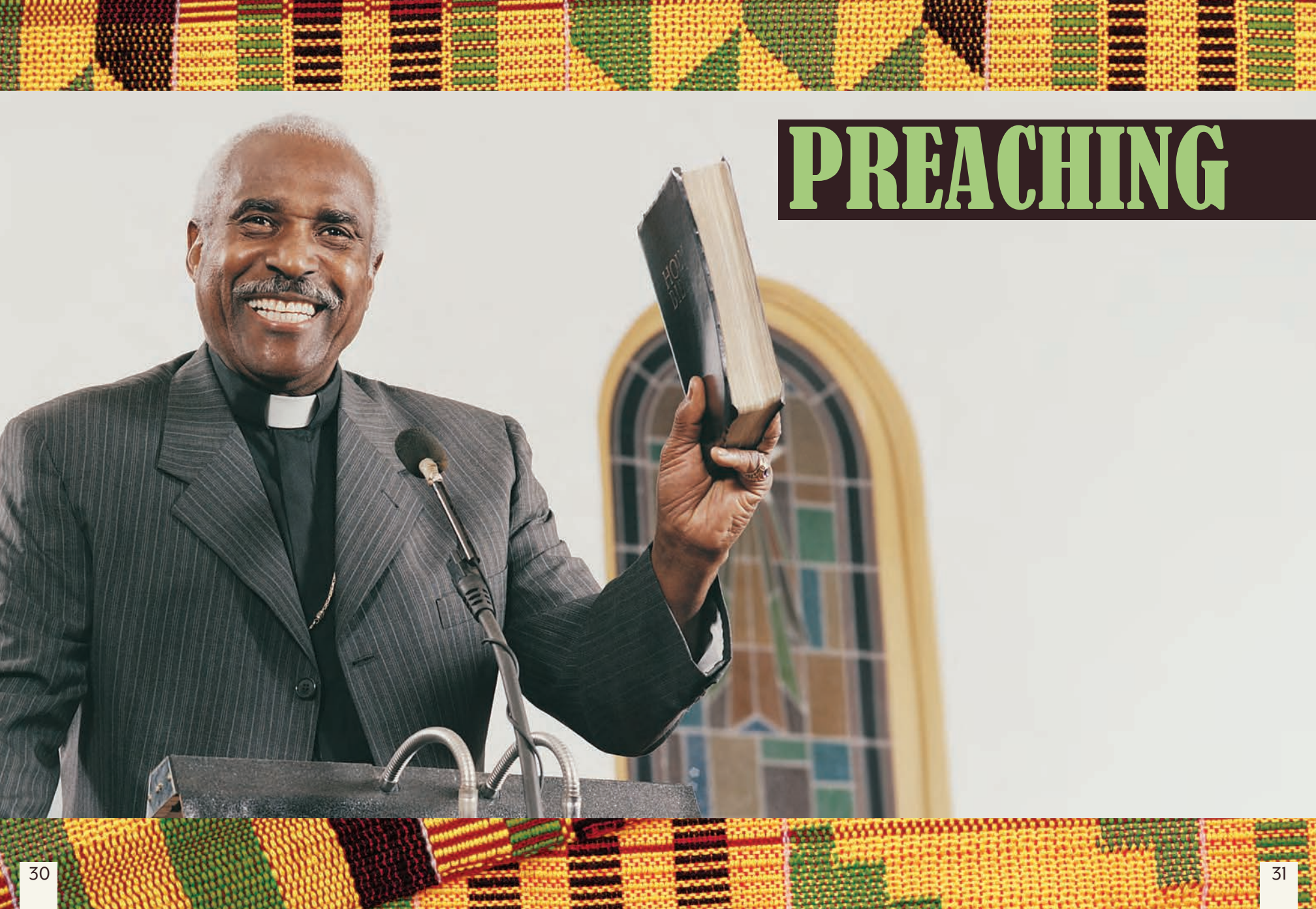
In the history of Unity, we know Charles Fillmore began to study various religions to understand the cause or the science behind the healings that occurred for him and Myrtle. It is my conclusion that Charles perhaps studied African spirituality as well as other religions, such as Buddhism and Islam, to develop the tenets of Unity. The Truth is the Truth is the Truth, no matter which religion is teaching it. The practices may change, but the tenets remain the same: God is love. We are love because we are made in the image and likeness of God. God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent.

Evidence that these principles are universal has continued to show up even in small ways.

As I continued my research, I remembered a minister from the 1970s, Reverend Ike. One of his affirmations was: *You can't lose with the stuff I use.* He taught the presence of God-in-you is your unlimited resource of good. Upon further research, I found that Reverend Ike studied authors such as Charles Fillmore, Napoleon Hill, Norman Vincent Peale, Emmet Fox, and several other New Thought writers.

When I joined Unity in 1994, one of the key phrases I heard was "let go and let God." Then a few years ago on Sunday morning as I prepared for church, I was listening to a local Baptist minister on the radio. He was talking about letting go and letting God! I knew this minister from working with him in the Omaha community and knew he was not progressive. He taught strictly from the Bible and believed women should not be ministers. Yet here again was the same phrase I had learned in New Thought. The Truth is the Truth is the Truth, wherever it is spoken or taught.

Rev. Karen Saunders was ordained in May 2013. Her mother, Rev. Helen D. Saunders, graduated from the first class of the Unity Urban Ministerial School, and Karen graduated from the first online class 30 years later. She currently is minister at Christ-Love Unity Church in Omaha, Nebraska, founded by her mother. In addition, she is the registrar and an adjunct professor for the Unity Urban Ministerial School.



PREACHING



New Thought Meets the Family

REV. ERIC OVID DONALDSON

In late July of 2023, my family and I traveled to Atlanta to a Donaldson/Porter family reunion. It was our first reunion since the Covid pandemic. The weekend was filled with fish fries, barbecues, picnics in the park, and family activities, and it culminated with Sunday church service.

Our reunion is a celebration of my father's side of the family. My father grew up alongside 13 siblings in the Black Baptist tradition in Alabama. As a young man, he became a part of the great migration north in search of gainful employment and landed in Detroit, where he met my mother, a Presbyterian.

They married in the mid-1950s and were introduced by friends to what is now Detroit Unity Temple, then led by minister and author Eric Butterworth. I was born in the early 1960s, so thanks to my parents, I grew up in the Unity movement. But during the summers of my early childhood, Dad would drive us back to Alabama to see his parents and our relatives. This was unofficially our family reunion.

When we gathered again this past summer, I was given the honor of leading our reunion's Sunday church service. This is not a given in my family, as we have many ministers. My cousin Reginald (a minister) began the service by picking up his folk guitar and, in the tradition of my grandfather, singing old spirituals and gospels. The entire family quickly chimed in as the service began to take on the characteristics of an old-fashioned church camp meeting.

Memories filled my mind as I recalled hearing these same songs as a child and witnessing my grandfather gather the family around him to sing each evening after dinnertime. I became present to how amazing it was that someone like me who grew up in New Thought would be trusted to give the family message.

Soon after I was called to the front of the room, I shared an African proverb that says a family lacking knowledge of its past is like a tree without roots. Roots are revived when they are moistened with the waters of remembrance, and the entire tree is nourished as a result. So, in the spirit of remembrance, I decided to offer libation. While libation is a cherished African tradition, it has not been a part of my family's tradition. But in talking with several people who were at the reunion, it was clear that we all wanted to bring into the space those who came before us, as well as those who were not in attendance. With a plant provided by the hotel, a pitcher of water, and the permission of my cousin Sonny (the eldest in the room), we began to evoke the names of loved ones past and present until the room was filled with their memories.

My message had many of the hallmarks of a New Thought message. It was practical. It was principled. It was filled with

affirmations that were well-received, including: *Repeat after me: Love is a family trait. I abide in love, for God abides in me and Tell somebody around you: I'm here to encourage you, not to discourage you.*

While the message wasn't overtly metaphysical, it was informed by my theological understanding. This is one of the things I love so much about my Unity upbringing and experience. I distinctly remember members of Detroit Unity Temple who would attend the early morning services at their family churches, then come to Unity to expand their understanding. It was clear to me that the Unity principles and teachings were something that could coincide with or be incorporated into one's traditional theology or that could stand alone. And while there are indeed differences between the Unity traditions and other traditions of faith, I grew up feeling that no one had to abandon their treasured faith traditions in order to adopt the New Thought pursuit of and approach to spiritual Truth.

I ended the reunion's family message with another spiritual song from my childhood, only this one I learned from my Unity upbringing. Not surprisingly, my family knew this one as well, and it was the perfect point to leave with them:

"The more we get together, together, together; The more we get together, the happier we'll be."

Rev. Eric Ovid Donaldson, or "Rev. E," is senior associate minister of operations at Unity of Sacramento, California, and an instructor for the Unity Urban Ministerial School.



A Woman in the Pulpit

REV. SANDRA CAMPBELL

Not long after my ordination as a Unity minister, a congregant introduced me to his wife as a "recovering Baptist." Apparently, we shared a similar religious experience since he seemed to have meant it as a compliment.

The dictionary defines *recovery* as the process of overcoming an illness or disorder. My Baptist upbringing does not fit that definition. It is my foundation. It is who I am.

That conversation led me to question my intentions for leaving the faith of my foundation for Unity, a part of the New Thought movement. I was baptized at Calvary Baptist Church in Kansas City, Kansas, when I was 8 years old. The baptismal pool looked like a huge bathtub enclosed behind the choir loft. I was wearing a white robe and a swimming cap. The preacher cradled his hands around my upper back, asked me if I was ready to be baptized, and repeated the words, “I now baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” as he dunked my whole body into the chilly water.

I emerged shivering and unsure of what I had done, but my cheering family standing nearby reassured me I had done what was expected. It was a big deal when a child made the decision to profess his or her life to Jesus Christ through baptism.

The first time I witnessed a Unity baptism with words and not water, I was completely surprised. Another surprise was when I met women who were ordained by Unity. According to the Baptist church, only a man could be a preacher. This belief is based on a literal interpretation of scripture. “I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:3).

As a youngster, I recognized many women in the church could be great preachers, but they were only allowed to serve in roles such as teachers, ushers, and missionaries. As I got older, I began to question a system that limited the positions women could hold.

The minister at the first Unity church I joined was a man, so I thought the rules must be the same. All that changed one Sunday when Rev. Sallye Taylor spoke at Unity Temple on the Plaza in Kansas City, and another Sunday when Rev. Sharon Poindexter led the service. Hearing

those two amazingly talented, knowledgeable, and inspiring Black women speaking from the platform let me know a Black woman could be a preacher. Who knew someday that would be me?

The delivery of the lessons I heard in Unity was completely different from the preaching tone I was used to. I fell in love with the style of delivery that focuses on teaching rather than preaching, but I must say there is nothing quite like the electrifying, dramatic, rhythmic style of Black preachers. At any given point in the sermon, the preachers switch from talking to singing the message. I try to incorporate that into my own delivery style, and I’ve found that when I do, the often-stoic audience comes alive. The same is true when gospel music from the Black church tradition is infused into a Unity service.

My introduction to Unity opened my mind to the fact that women could be ministers and that I could incorporate the best of my foundation from the Baptist church into the New Thought teachings, which emphasize teaching rather than preaching. I have incorporated the music into my messages, which I believe help the sermons leap from the pulpit into the hearts of the listeners. Whereas I grew up in a church with an all-Black congregation, I find that my diverse Unity congregation now also appreciates a style that includes dramatic, soul-stirring music and messages that teach rather than preach the good news.

Rev. Sandra Campbell is associate minister at Unity Temple on the Plaza in Kansas City, Missouri, and executive director of the Unity Urban Ministerial School.



Roles of Women in Church

REV. EDITH WASHINGTON-WOODS

When I was a child growing up in Gary, Indiana, I lived in a mixed-faith family. My mother's family were Catholics, my father's Baptists. My maternal grandmother was the matriarch of our family. She wanted her children and grandchildren to be raised Catholic, therefore, my father was forbidden to take us to his Baptist church.

At Catholic mass and in Catholic schools, I encountered only white male priests, white male altar boys, and white female nuns. We attended mass—in Latin—on Sundays and on Fridays during the school day. As each service began, the priest and altar boys processed into the sanctuary and incense filled the air. Nuns were not allowed to process in; they sat in the pews. Nuns took a vow of poverty, lived in a convent, and were devoted to God. In my view, their role was to teach in Catholic

schools, be strict disciplinarians, and be subservient to the priest. It was unheard of for women to be priests.

In the same way, women were not allowed to pastor in Baptist churches. In defiance of our matriarch, my father and his mother used to “sneak” my brother and me into Baptist church services from time to time. At my father's Baptist church, there was a Mother's Board of several women who sat in the front pews wearing white dresses, white stockings, white gloves, white handkerchiefs, and often white hats. Some women even wore white shoes. Their role was to care for anyone who became faint or passed out as a result of being filled with the Holy Ghost. Other women had roles taking care of the congregation, too, including directing choirs, playing the organ, working in the office, or cooking meals.

This was justified by verses such as 1 Corinthians 14:34: “Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says.”

Even so, I was often confused and upset that women could not be priests or pastors.

I left my Catholic/Baptist background as an adult, tried the United Methodists for a while, then was invited to Unity and settled in. When I received the “call” to be a minister in August 2003, I was shocked. How could I be a minister? Thoughts of male priests and pastors still filled my mind. I wrestled with it like Jacob wrestled with the angel in Genesis 32:26: “Then [the angel] said, ‘Let me go, for the day is breaking.’ But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go, unless you bless me.’”

At that moment, I let go, stating *Lead me and guide me, oh Spirit. Somehow, I will be blessed by this.* I started to recall seeing many female

ministers in class ordination photographs displayed the length of a hallway, in what was then the Education Building at Unity Village. I was keenly aware women were accepted as ministers in Unity. Knowing this drew me in even more.

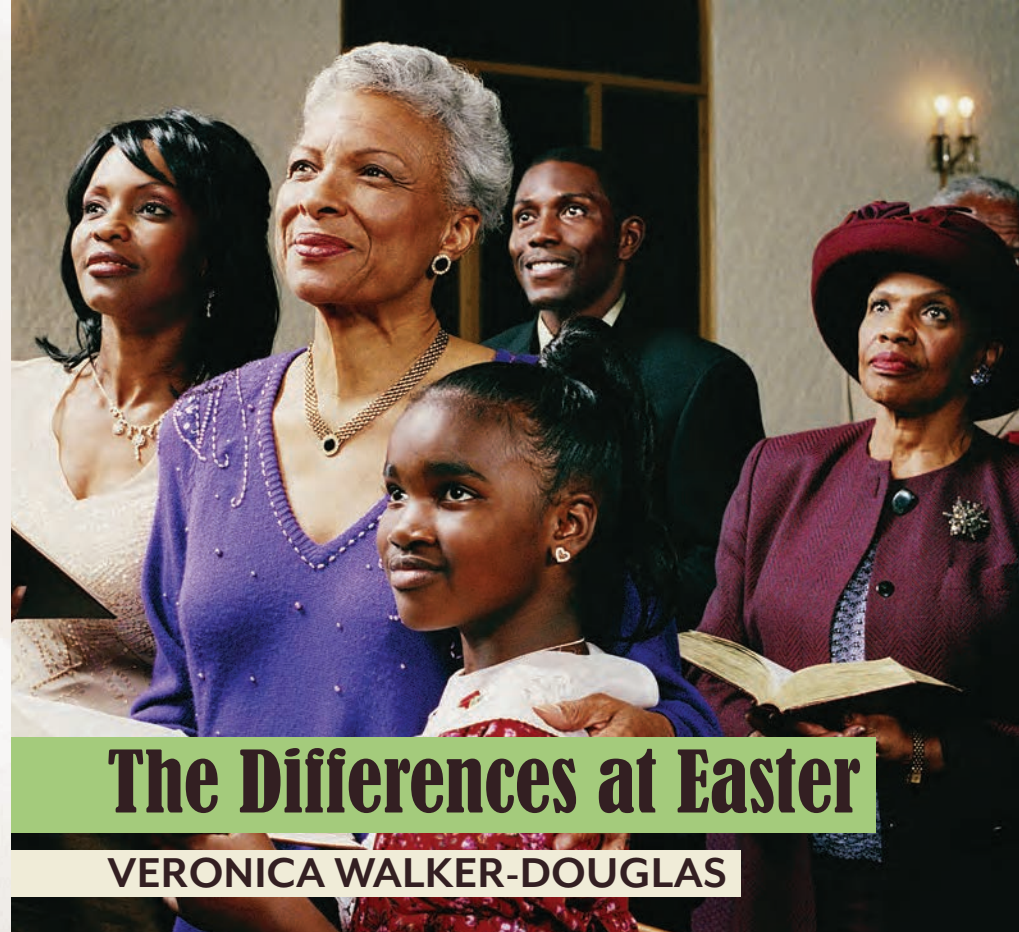
As I studied theology and the Bible as a seminary student, I realized the Bible and both religions of my youth were rooted in patriarchy. However, I discovered how to have my own relationship with the God of my understanding, and subsequently with the Bible.

As a result of my Unity studies, I started to appreciate the Catholic and Baptist religions. Even though Latin was phased out by 1970, when I was 10, it led me to take Latin for three years in high school. And even though women had subservient roles in both religions, I realized nuns and groups like the Mother's Board were revered by the congregation. They were the glue that held their churches together.

Unfortunately, due to their different religions, my parents' marriage didn't last long. But who I am as a Unity minister is a product of their differences.

I listened to the call that warm summer night and leaned into being a strong, caring, empathetic, female-identified minister. There are times I experience my Catholic roots, such as when I make the sign of the cross passing by a traffic accident. And there are times when the Holy Spirit takes over my finite body and I am very much preaching like a Baptist minister.

Rev. Edith Washington-Woods is senior minister at Unity of Gaithersburg, Maryland.



The Differences at Easter

VERONICA WALKER-DOUGLAS

My New Thought experience began 45 years ago when I was 12 and eagerly walked into the Sunday school at Christ Universal Temple in Chicago. However, prior to this time and on many occasions throughout my adulthood, I attended Black Baptist churches to worship with family and friends.

In 2012, I spent a transformational year in a culturally diverse Christian church. I felt overwhelmed by constant references to the Devil, heaven, and hell. I opened my heart to this as a temporary and divine learning

experience. Mentally, I reframed the preaching to align with New Thought teachings. Today, I reflect on this as a time to stand firm on Truth principles learned and lived since my youth. The Black preaching tradition is an approach to sermon delivery that seeks to appeal to the mind and emotions, rooted in the painful experiences of slavery. New Thought has always been referred to as a teaching ministry.

I remember attending the annual Easter sunrise service at my aunt's church in Chicago. I honored this tradition to connect with my aunt. I knew what to expect in this traditional Black church, yet I was amazed at the predictability of the preacher, who constantly reminded the congregation that "Jesus died on the cross for our sins" and gave graphic descriptions of the nails in his hands and crown of thorns on his head. I remember feeling sad, both during and after the preaching and solemn music. But there was always laughter when the preacher said, "I'm not going to keep you long because I know you need to finish cooking that ham!"

During this 6 a.m. service, there would be constant shouting and the "Holy Ghost dance" in response to being moved by the Holy Spirit. The energy of praise and worship was further ignited by the traditional style of ending a sermon in the Black church. The preacher groans with high-pitched sounds backed by the organ and asks the church to say *Amen*.

I was unsure of the message I was taking away for life application, but I could see the hope in the congregation as they left the sanctuary. Perhaps they had remembered that through God's grace, we can begin anew. I would attend services at Christ Universal Temple and hear the legendary Rev. Johnnie

Colemon, D.D., teach that in New Thought, Easter represents an inner experience of recognizing that Christ or divine energy has risen in me. I was empowered to know that I could come out of the tomb of limitation and rise in the power of the resurrected Christ.

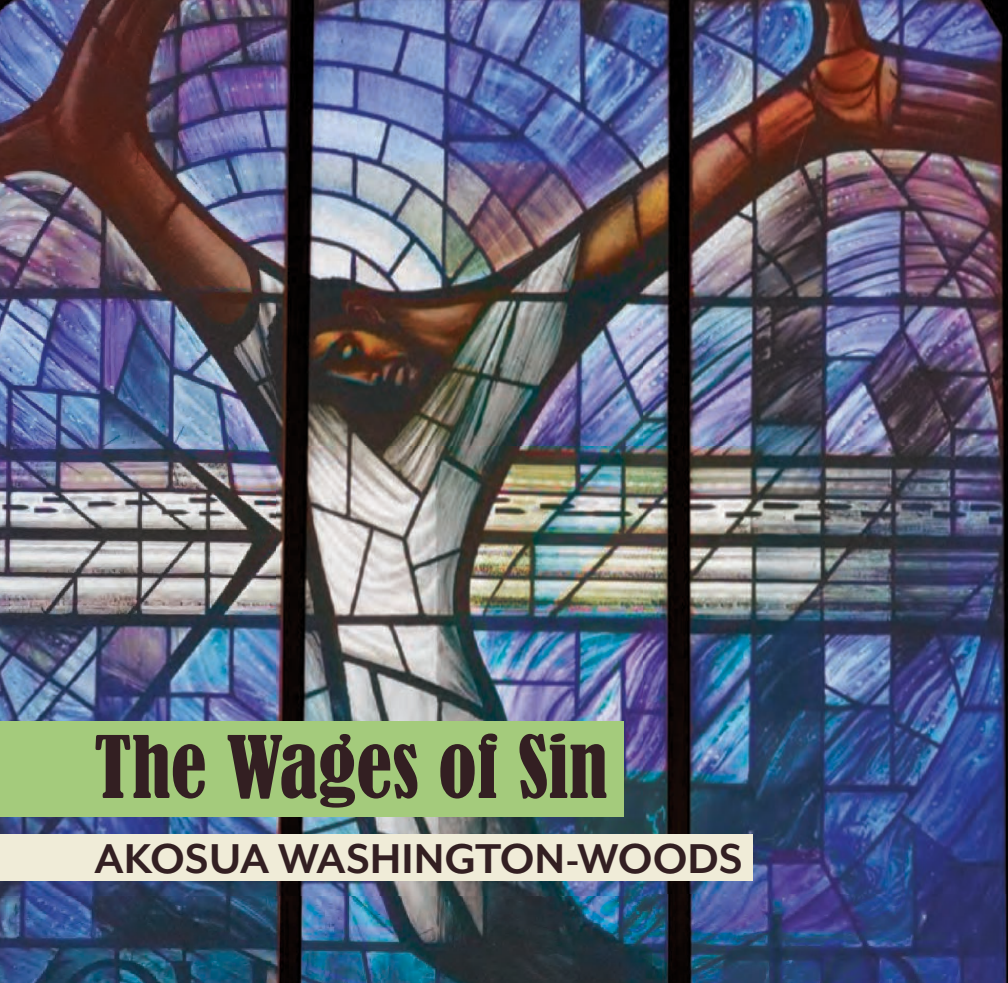
The Black church continues to be a house of worship and a solid foundation for the Black community. To me, the significant difference between the traditional Black church and the New Thought church is learning that we do not have to wait for the "by and by" but can choose to live in the here and now. We are taught that every individual on the face of this earth should live a healthy, prosperous, and happy life, experiencing growth and expansion by practicing spiritual principles for daily living.

I have cherished learning that heaven and hell are states of consciousness, not places. I do not have to fear evil or the Devil. Most important, for more than 45 years, I have maintained faith in the Truth principles taught and instilled in me by Rev. Colemon and our New Thought leaders.

Yes, there is nothing like a good, down-home Baptist service in a Black church to set your soul on fire with passionate preaching, gospel singing, and the presence of the Lord being felt in every pew. There may be a difference in preaching versus teaching, but—whether we are in fellowship in Black or New Thought churches—wherever we are, God is.

Let the church say *Amen*.

Veronica Walker-Douglas is a clinical social worker in Illinois and is affiliated with Christ Universal Temple in Chicago.



The Wages of Sin

AKOSUA WASHINGTON-WOODS

I grew up in both a largely white Catholic church and an almost exclusively African-American Baptist congregation. My mother was Catholic, my father was Baptist. Thus began my decades-long soul-searching journey. In my Catholic school, I was taught that because both my parents were not Catholic, it was a mortal sin and we were sure to go to hell. But if I prayed really, really hard, my father would find his way to the “true” church. The Baptists were a little more forgiving, but not by much.

Sunday routine: mass with my mother at 8 a.m., pancake house breakfast, then church with my father late morning. Quite frankly, I liked attending my father’s Baptist church more. The music was louder, I had more friends there, and the Jesus picture at the front of the church looked just like me, with black curly hair and dark brown skin. Same with the paper fans from the funeral home that ushers handed out when it got hot—the picture on each fan of a little girl praying looked just like me too.

Both spiritual communities dwelled on sin and salvation. One was telling me I was doomed to hell and not really giving me much hope of avoiding it, while the other was saying that if I confessed my sins in front of the congregation maybe God would forgive me enough that I could go to heaven.

As an adult I was steeped in the Black church tradition, deeply involved. I was a founder and officer in an incredibly busy gospel choir that toured all over the East Coast. We sang in churches—from Church of God in Christ to Baptist, evangelical, and everything in between. I was active in my local AME Zion church where sin and salvation were weekly lessons.

During those years I was also having a spiritual crisis around my sexuality, wrestling with all the negative messages I had heard all my life, from both the pulpit and society, telling me I was one of God’s greatest sinners and had no hope of ever attaining the ultimate goal, my ascension to heaven. I listened to ministers, almost exclusively male, tell me I was an abomination to God and the deep, deep fires of hell were all I could look forward to.

Yet in all of those spaces, even in the pulpits, were folks I *knew* were LGBTQIA+ themselves. Every Sunday the call for repentance, for

salvation, would ring out. It didn't matter which traditional spiritual community I was in, I would sit there and wonder how I was supposed to live my life being true to who I am.

It became clear to me that I couldn't reconcile who I was and the traditional church communities I was part of. So one Sunday I left in the middle of the sermon. I took my kid, my talent, and my treasure, and I left. I didn't go back to a spiritual community for about three decades.

But I missed the rituals, the music, and even some of the messaging. I was searching for something that would feed my soul and my heart. In 2013 I walked into my first Unity church, and I found a home.

This didn't happen without confusion or questioning. I initially found it hard to separate God in the sky from God within. It took me some time to wholly recognize the complete Divine in me. I have fully embraced Unity teachings yet still keep some of the traditional teachings that serve me as well. Prayer and meditation have become my daily practice. New Thought teachings give me a road map for living. I am home and deeply committed. I am a divinely fabulous spiritual being.

To quote one of my favorite gospel songs, "It is well with my soul."

Akosua Washington-Woods is a licensed Unity teacher who serves as youth and family ministries director and a prayer chaplain at Unity of Gaithersburg, Maryland.



A New View of God

MARILYN KING-COMPTON

My earliest reflections regarding religion occurred when I was about 5. My father's mother was in failing health and we moved from Columbus, Ohio, to Kansas City, Kansas. My paternal grandparents were dedicated Baptists. My grandfather, Professor William Franklin King, was an elementary school principal who also taught Sunday school. I was told that in earlier years, my grandmother, Mary Hobbs King, had been an evangelist.

An account of my grandmother's dedication was reported on the front page of the *Topeka Plaindealer* newspaper in 1913. "Mrs. W. F. King arrived home on the 10th from Sugar Grove, Mo. and McBane, Mo.,

where she went about a month ago, to assist in a revival meeting, in which she was instrumental in several being brought to Christ, and to show how much they appreciated her services they raised \$37.00 and presented it to her, and on the 14th they sent her a calf, two geese and two ducks.”

Early on I was taught about a loving, caring, and protective God, far away, up in the expansive skies of blue. I learned the “Lord’s Prayer,” the Beatitudes, and the 23rd Psalm. Giving thanks to God at mealtimes was always a pleasant interaction with family.

Several years later, my parents relocated to Chicago to assist my maternal grandparents. My mother and father affiliated themselves with St. John Church-Baptist. I joined and became active in youth activities.

In the 1970s, much attention was being given to a new church in Chicago called Christ Unity Temple (now Christ Universal Temple). The buzz concerned an exciting lady minister named Johnnie Coleman, an African-American woman who had studied and graduated from Unity School of Christianity. I decided to visit the Temple one Sunday morning.

Rev. Coleman’s message presented a new explanation for God—a God as Spirit, dwelling right within the reach of each one of us. She also spoke about the divinity of human beings. She explained how we could live happier, healthier, and more prosperous lives by thinking spiritually. What an eye-opening and ear-bending revelation!

Johnnie, as she liked to be called, was elegant and her sermon was delivered in a believable and enticing fashion. Many of those who visited were from different denominations and they, too, were inspired by what they were hearing and learning. After that first experience,

the majority did not return to their home churches but became a part of Johnnie’s growing flock. I was one of them.

I enrolled in the Johnnie Coleman Institute’s Better Living Classes along with many others. We learned about Charles and Myrtle Fillmore, who founded the Unity spiritual movement. My first class was basic Truth principles based on *Lessons in Truth*. I remember so well H. Emilie Cady’s first chapter, “Bondage or Liberty, Which?” I became consciously aware of the power and value of thought—how right thoughts, words, feelings, actions, and reactions could affect the success or failure of the circumstances popping up in my life and the world. I learned how to think positively regarding my relationships with others.

The Revealing Word and *Metaphysical Bible Dictionary*, both written by Charles Fillmore, explained scriptures in a way that still intrigues me. Study of the 12 powers and *Discover the Power Within You* by Unity author Eric Butterworth led me to understand the meaning and mission of Jesus and the 12 disciples. Their awesome, indwelling spiritual powers are always available and at our disposal. I began to internalize each and every one. Whenever called forth, they responded to my concerns. It was like a new religious revolution taking place within me.

I am forever grateful for my Baptist religious background. I may not be an evangelist like my grandmother, but *my* mission is to utilize my talents by touching the lives of others with words of Truth. Practicing the principles of New Thought Christianity transformed my world. Yours can be transformed too!

Marilyn King-Compton is a long-standing member of Christ Universal Temple in Chicago and for nearly 40 years has been a contributing writer for Daily Inspiration for Better Living.

BIBLE





Reclaiming the Bible

REV. SHERRI JAMES

Some of my fondest childhood memories come from attending Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church. In Houston, Texas, going to church was the only thing you did on Sundays. Everything else was closed.

We'd arrive at 9 a.m. for a two-hour Sunday school lesson. Then we'd migrate over to the main sanctuary where we sat with our parents. Church started at 11 a.m. and normally did not end until 2 p.m. But if the Spirit got to moving, oh boy! We might not get out of there until 3 or even 4 p.m.!

As a child, learning about the Bible meant memorization. I remember winning a prize at Vacation Bible School, which I looked forward to every summer, for memorizing all 66 books of the Bible and being able to name them in order. I think I might still be able to do that today.

Every Christmas and Easter, we children were “on program” and each had a speech to present, typically a Bible verse or passage we had memorized. We'd spend hours in front of our parents rehearsing. We definitely didn't want to be the children who hadn't put in the time to memorize their speeches.

I can recall being given a Bible, and I can still see the cover. There was a picture of the traditional Jesus sitting in a pasture. There were sheep around him and maybe a couple of children. I was so proud of this Bible. I wrote my name on the inside cover. Every Sunday, I brought my Bible with me to church. I knew how to look up verses in it. And since I was a good speaker, I loved being called on to read it aloud.

What's interesting to me is that although the Bible was front and center in my church experience as a little girl, I do not feel that I developed a real relationship with the Bible until I stepped into New Thought.

Two things happened that made this relationship possible.

First, I had the good fortune of being raised by an irreverent English professor who told me early on: “Sherri, I know English and I know rhetoric. What they're telling you that Bible is saying is not what it's saying. That isn't what those words mean. Plus, all that stuff they say about women is just so they can keep them in their place.”

Armed with that healthy dose of skepticism, I had been given the freedom to question. I went on a quest to find a spiritual teaching that my mom would approve of. Despite all the Sundays we had spent in church because that's what everyone did, I knew I couldn't come home professing a belief in traditional Christian doctrine.

For a long time I stayed away from the Bible. My mom's stance on Christianity was so impactful that I honestly did not trust the Bible, and I didn't trust anyone who went around quoting the Bible.

The second thing that happened was attending Panorama of Truth, the annual gathering of the Universal Foundation for Better Living, in Chicago in 1998. The minister for the closing Sunday service was none other than the Bible-toting metaphysician herself, Rev. Mary A. Tumpkin, D.Min. That woman opened her mouth, and my life has never been the same.

Under her tutelage, I came to love the Bible. Through her teaching, the Bible came alive for me.

I started to see how these ancient communities were just like you and me. They had hopes. They had dreams. They were spiritual beings making sense of their world in the best way they knew how. And they had spiritual principles to impart to us, even if their understanding of the world varied wildly from ours.

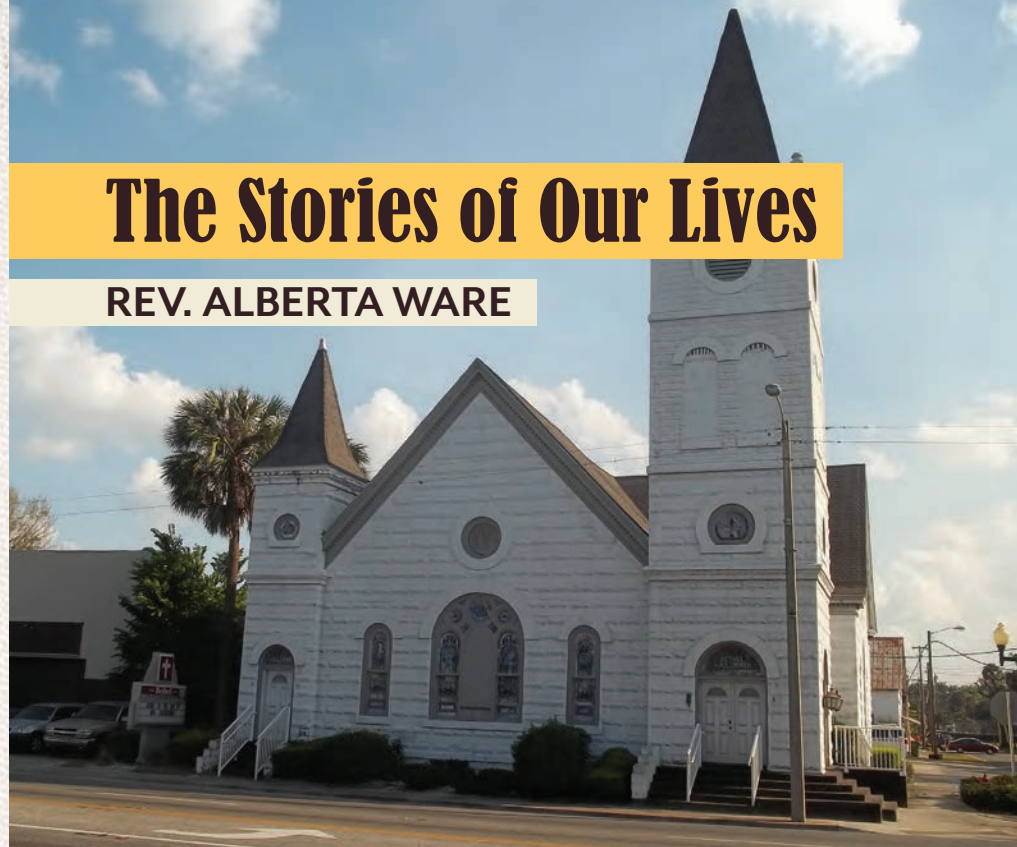
Today the Bible is central in my spiritual study. I do not compose a sermon without including some story or verse. Each morning before I send my 9-year-old off to school, I share a Bible story with him.

But rather than insisting he memorize a bunch of verses, I take him where I wish my first Bible teachers had taken me: Exodus 3:13-15. I want him to know that God's name is I AM and that each time he uses that name, he's invoking the whole spirit of God. So be mindful of what you attach to your I AM.

Rev. Sherri James is the senior minister at UP Church in Inglewood, California.

The Stories of Our Lives

REV. ALBERTA WARE



My first encounter with the Holy Bible was through the Bible stories shared by my Sunday school teacher. In the beginner's class, the teacher had a small card with a picture to illustrate the story. Each student received a card and they were precious to us, especially to me.

That was my experience every Sunday until I was promoted to a level where the lessons had grown, from a small card to activity sheets and then to a booklet that covered the entire quarter. Around age 8 or 9 I was given a book of illustrated Bible stories that spanned the year.

I have loved books for as long as I can remember, but the *Daily Bible Stories* book was special and my favorite. I read the stories over and over. The literal interpretation of the Bible, which I was being taught, had me believing that heaven was a beautiful place and hell was a pit of fire with the Devil figure stoking the flames.

My first Bible was unique in that all the proper names were written with notations on pronunciation, much like a dictionary. I still have it and refer to it. I have other resources, but there's just something special about your first Holy Bible.

Growing up with a grandfather who was an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Evangelist, there was never a Sunday that I was not in church, and I was there sometimes during the week too. Church was always an integral part of my life.

Granted, however, there was a time later when I was not attending any church. I used the excuse of oversleeping after a night of dancing and partying and, after a while, not going became a habit. But I realized something important and necessary was missing from my life that could not be found in my current activities. I needed to return to my spiritual foundation. Thus began my search for a church.

A friend kept inviting me to attend his church to hear the choir. I visited and it was wonderful, but due to my work schedule, I could not attend consecutive Sundays. When I did return, the minister came up to me after the service and said, "I've missed you a few Sundays. Is everything all right?" I was hooked!

I became an active member of that church and more involved with the Bible, still taking it literally. I was introduced to Christ Unity Temple in Chicago (now Christ Universal Temple) by my mother and started

to attend services and classes. That was when I discovered there was another way to read the Holy Bible, that it could be interpreted both literally and metaphysically. The metaphysical interpretation provided a deeper dive into the messages and made Bible stories the story of our lives.

I came to realize that each time you read a scripture, the message can be different and will meet you wherever you are in consciousness. I love the fact that it provides the answers to questions and dilemmas you may encounter. To learn that each proper name represents a state of consciousness is a start to understanding the messages of the Bible.

Metaphysical Bible interpretation released me from the nightmares I had as a child when the preacher preached from the Book of Revelation. What a wonderful gift understanding provides. Look at what is occurring in your life, world, and affairs and avoid the pitfalls that befell many of the characters in the Bible. There are wonderful New Thought resources available such as the *Metaphysical Bible Dictionary*, *The Revealing Word*, and a wealth of other materials to aid in understanding the Bible.

My return to my spiritual foundation all those years ago resulted in my becoming a licensed teacher through the Universal Foundation for Better Living, then an ordained minister, and now dean of ministerial training for the Johnnie Coleman Theological Seminary.

Rev. Alberta Ware is a staff minister at Christ Universal Temple in Chicago and dean of ministerial training for the Johnnie Coleman Theological Seminary.



Where Will You End Up?

REV. SABA MCHUNGUZI

There are three concepts prominent throughout Christian churches and definitely in the Black church: heaven, hell, and the Devil. I remember that as a child, the idea was drummed into us that if we were “good,” then when we died, we would go up to heaven to be with God, Jesus, and the angels. We would see our deceased family members who had also gone to heaven. Whenever someone died, especially if they were in the church, it was always said that “they have gone to be with the Lord.” So it was good to go to heaven even though no one wanted to die.

We were cautioned as children not to be “bad” because we would then go down to hell when we died. Hell was described as a fiery furnace that was dark and populated with evil spirits and ruled by the Devil. No one wanted to go there! We were also told that the Devil was a powerful being who was always trying to get people to do evil or bad things.

Each of these concepts are still taught and believed today by many well-meaning people. Unfortunately, the traditional meanings of these concepts are erroneous. We have only to look at the words of Jesus who

said, “the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 4:17) and “the kingdom of God is among you” (Luke 17:21). We interpret this to mean that heaven is within us and not up in the sky or some faraway place.

Jesus used several parables to describe the heaven he was talking about. He began each one by saying “The kingdom of heaven is like ...” None of his descriptions imply a place where people go to when they die. Unity cofounder Charles Fillmore wrote in the *Metaphysical Bible Dictionary*, “The kingdom of heaven, or of the heavens, is a state of consciousness in which the soul and the body are in harmony with divine mind.” He is telling us that heaven—that place we conceive of where all is well and all is in divine order—is actually a state of mind.

We do not have to wait until we die to experience such a state. We can experience peace, happiness, wholeness, and abundance right here and right now. In fact, we need to shift our focus from thinking that life is and has to be hard, to realizing that we can (and were actually meant to) experience a good life right here and right now. We are meant to

experience “heaven on earth,” and we can do so by aligning and harmonizing our human consciousness with God consciousness.

If heaven *up there* doesn’t really exist, then what about hell *down there*? The word *hell* as used in the gospels was translated from the Greek word *Gehenna*. This was actually the local garbage dump outside of Jerusalem. It was kept on fire all the time to burn and destroy everything thrown in it. Needless to say, it smelled horrible and was not a place anyone wanted to go. As such, “hell” was considered a place of eternal fire, anguish, and death.

In truth, there is no physical or even symbolic place called hell. Just like heaven, hell is not a place we go to when we die but a state of consciousness we can experience now. It is a state of mind that includes limitation, fear, doubt, worry, negative thoughts, and bad actions we engage in. The English poet John Milton wrote in *Paradise Lost*, “The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heav’n of Hell, a Hell of Heav’n.”

In Unity, we often say, “There is only one presence and one power in the universe, God the good, omnipotent.” We believe there is no power equal to God or challenging God, no force of evil called Satan or the Devil. There is no entity or power that is separate from God. People sometimes act from their lower, human instincts and do things in opposition to their divine nature. But as we lift our consciousness and connect with our indwelling spirit, we can overcome these temptations, just as Jesus did.

Rev. Saba Mchunguzi is minister at Unity of Huntington in Huntington Station, New York.

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