
A History of the Origins of African American Sacred Music

**World Council of Churches'
Bossey Ecumenical Institute**

Consultation on Sacred Music

**July 31-August 7, 2005
Geneva, Switzerland**

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A portion of this conference participation by Rev. Gill is supported by a Lilly Endowment for Clergy Renewal.

This paper is an adaptation of a paper delivered at the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Office of the Vatican's conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in September of 2004.

1. Preface and Abstract:

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:18-19)

Many scholars have provided books, treatises, dissertations, research and monographs on the topic of African American sacred music (Spirituals and Gospel). This paper offers an abbreviated history based on many of these early scholars. In a small way it represents the scores of people who have lived out this faith experience and who through their praxis and witness have given a living testament to the gifts of African Americans as reflected in their sacred music.

Most of my professional writing has focused on Christian women who have contributed to this body of knowledge, theology and praxis. These particular women have found their way into the history books and the theological writings and reference sources of many scholars and yet the essence of their contributions has yet to be crystallized and celebrated at a forum such as this. In particular my writing deals with African American women in the U. S. Congress, African American women in ethical and moral leadership roles in the U.S. and African biblical women. However, this paper discusses the contributions of both men and women who provide the foundation for the African American spiritual legacy in song and worship.

Specifically, this paper addresses the following:

Introduction:

This section takes a look at African American Spirituals as the genre for dispensing values in the African American.

Values

The institution of the Black Church vs. the Institution of the Village as the communal repository of wisdom and values is the thesis underlying this section.

Values about Women in the family:

African American women and the construction of value systems based on Christian virtues.

Peace and the Family:

Social Justice as a value in the African American Communities of Faith and as reflected in their sacred music.

One of the major themes of this paper centers on the values that emerged from the evolution of the “family” in the African American Christian tradition. It was a faith community that served as the foundation for African Americans during the centuries of fractured and shattered family structures. In the words of African Theologian John Mbiti, it allowed African Americans to say, “I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am.” Within this faith community, African Americans replaced bloodline relationships with spiritual relationships; they replaced the proverbs they knew in Africa with the Spirituals they composed and sang in America; they replaced the African familial

bloodlines of the village and the tribe with spiritual membership in the household of God. As if in the newness of a nation, they became a new people—physically disconnected from Africa and spiritually disenfranchised in America. Pulled from the spiritual roots they knew, they transplanted the remnants of their African Spirituality into a new soil and created a new branch of the Christian tree. In short, their contributions spoke to a “new thing”, not unlike Isaiah’s prophetic word to the Israelites.

This paper focuses on that “new thing”—a family prescribed by the New Testament theology of the “Kingdom of God”; new communities of faith designed to reinforce the relationship between African Americans and God; a new sacred music that replaced the wisdom of the African proverbs; new insight into the love ethic of Jesus Christ; and the creation of a new ethic of womanhood based on Christian values.

It is important to state what this paper is not. It is not an attempt to prove the existence of a correlation between African and African American cultural and spiritual practices and ethics. It is not an effort to point out the similarities between African Spirituality and African American Spirituality. It is not a sociological treatise on the black family and/or slavery. It does not argue the nuances of what is African and what are Africanisms. It does not explore historical nuances for the names African American, Negro, Black, Colored, or Afro-American, nor will it provide etymological narratives regarding the use of African as adjective or noun.¹ Rather, I hope to provide a brief overview of the major contributions of African Americans to the genre we call “Sacred Music” from a Christian perspective. This paper closes with a section on African American women and their establishment of religious values in response to the degradation of African women during slavery.

The paper has four sections:

1. Preface and Abstract
2. Introduction
3. The African American Family
4. The Black Church
5. Social Justice—a Value of the Black Church
6. The African American Spirituals—a genre for conveying wisdom and values
7. The Creation of Values for Women, Mothers and Wives
8. Conclusion:

Chart A: Africans Transported by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

Chart B: African American Faith Communities 1800-1910

Chart C: Samples of African American Spirituals

Chart D: Partial List of Significant African American Women of Faith

Exhibit: CD’s of African American Sacred Music in various musical formats (Jazz, Opera, Blues, Gospels...)

Endnotes

2. Introduction:

In order to place the African American experience in a context I offer background for the historical place that marks when and where African Americans enter onto the world stage.

In his many writings, but particularly in the notes in The Original African Heritage Study Bible, the New Testament scholar, Dr. Cain Hope Felder reminds us of the many contributions of Africans to the development of the early Christian Church. He points to 189 AD when Christianity—a nascent religion in North Africa—produced such African Church fathers as Tertullian and the first African Pope, St. Victor (189 A.D.); and he recounts the heart-warming story of St. Maurice of Africa and his conversion and martyrdom of himself and his legion of soldiers.

“It was upon the blood of these and many other African martyrs that the Church of Africa grew. It was during the reign of the second African Pope, St. Melchiades (310-314 A.D.) that the Edict of Milan was issued by the Roman state, granting freedom to Christians. Now, after three centuries, it was no longer a crime for a Christian to practice his faith. In the Roman sections of Africa, Christianity was free to prosper and develop.”²

It is clear from the writings of Felder and many others that the contributions of Africans of the early Christian church were many, varied, and rich. Whether we are talking about the father of theology, Augustine; the mothers of martyrdom, Perpetua and Felicitas; the father of monasticism, Antony; or the father of creeds, Anthanasius, we know that Africans formed the basis for many Christian religious doctrines, creeds, faith traditions and much theology. In truth, Africans are an integral part of Christian heritage. Therefore, the question before us today is what are some of the contributions to sacred music and worship since that first five to six centuries of North African apologetics, scholarship, and faithful witness. The story of the contribution of Africans in America begins a little over 1,000 years after this first wave of African Christian heritage.

*“By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”
(Psalm 137:1-4)*

A “new thing” arose out of the spiritual heritage of Africans in America—a place where they were asked to sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land. What was meant for evil produced good. Out of the devastating legacy of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade came, a new people—African Americans—but also a new spiritual understanding, a new definition of family, a new definition of womanhood, a new sacred music, a new understanding of social justice, and not incidentally, a new nation for it is doubtful the

young United States could have emerged in strength without the millions of lifetimes of labor extracted from African American slave labor. Beyond this stark reality, it is not hyperbole to say that the nature of faith formation and the incessant calls for justice by African Americans transformed the United States, giving many a genuinely renewed Christian understanding of the Gospel in praxis.

Known in its various stages as “slave religion”, “Black religion” and “the Black church tradition”, the community of faith of African Americans produced The Negro Spirituals; a new contextualized theology of Black liberation and womanist theology; and it created communities of faith that spoke to the unique religious practices of African American worship. This African American religious understanding opened the minds and hearts of the most powerful nation in the world through the use of non-violence and produced social justice victories by proclaiming the New Testament love ethic of Jesus.

This newness of spiritual and religious insight came out of the Grace of God, which under girded the praxis of a people who had only faith to depend upon as they forged their way through the ravages of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. For the African in America, defining their humanity became an integral part of their faith journey. Creating a spiritual family where bloodlines were erased gave them a new biblical understanding of kinship. Women who could not be protected from sexual assault, who were separated from children, who had been used as breeders for economic gain, had to re-create what it meant to be female, sister, mother and/or wife and to affirm their humanity. Out of this came “a new thing” in religious understanding, praxis and proclamation. The values articulated and lived out by African American Christians carved a place in the worldwide legacy of human responses to oppression and slavery.

3. The African American Family

“Undoubtedly, the conditions of slavery nullified the structural arrangements for viable family life. Viewed and treated as property, slaves were afforded none of the conditions that contributed to the moral development of human beings...Slave marriages were generally disallowed and even when permitted they had no standing in civil law... Accordingly, if allowed to live together, their life in the slave quarters was respected no more than that of the other livestock. Either they themselves or their children could be separated, brutally beat, sexually abused, sold or even killed at anytime ”³

Between the period 1450 and 1900, it is estimated that the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade delivered over 11 million Africans to British North America, Brazil, Spanish America, and the British, French and Dutch Caribbean. The African American enslavement is generally considered to have begun in or around the 1600’s. This slave trade created an African Diaspora that dispersed tribal bloodlines and kinships of Ewe, Fulani, Asante, Ibo, Yoruba, Mandingo and Hausa throughout the North and Central Americas.⁴

While African Americans can trace their heritage to Angola, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Senegal or Gambia, tribal blood kinships are much more difficult to ascertain. {See

Chart A} Of course, research into trade documents might produce information on some tribal kinship, since much of the slave trade came out of recorded business transactions between victorious African tribal Chieftains who turned over their adversaries to slave traders in exchange for goods such as guns and gunpowder.

As a consequence of these practices and losses approaching 75% between capture and delivery from the hold of a ship, family and bloodlines for African slaves was a distant memory once they crossed the Atlantic. Once in America, further separation took place as Africans were placed on plantations throughout the South and the North. Africans were not placed as “families” on plantations, but as purchased property—portable and mobile as dictated by the slaveholders. The definition of family, then, by bloodline would be elusive for nearly three centuries. The buying and selling of infants, the rape of slave women by European slave owners, the deliberate separation of husbands and wives and the prohibition against marriage during this time meant that family bloodlines were severed. Family protection would come from God and family values would emerge from the church that proclaimed and celebrated a new relationship.

With a faith in God’s providence African Americans anchored themselves in religion. It is evident in the words spoken by the mother (Ma Bet) of the celebrated abolitionist and evangelist Sojourner Truth as she tries to assure her daughter that nothing can truly separate her from the love of God.

“My children, there is a God, who hears and sees you,’ she told them. ‘He lives in the sky...and when you are beaten or cruelly treated, or fall into any trouble, you must ask help of him, and he will always hear and help you.’”⁵

Such advice came from women who were available to dispense wisdom to biological as well as spiritual offspring. In presenting this admonition, the writers of Come this Far by Faith, ask the rhetorical question:

“Who was this God to whom Ma Bet entrusted her children’s lives? Was he the God she had brought with her across the waters from Africa? Was he the God of Christianity, first person of the Holy Trinity? Most likely he was a bit of both. The Dutch Calvinism taught in the Reformed tradition throughout the Hudson River Valley (New York) influenced Ma Bet...The God of Ma Bet’s African past was much more personal; this God was concerned with her daily activities and struggles. She knew it was necessary for her children to have God to lean on at any minute. So in addition to the Lord’s Prayer, she taught them to talk with God in a personal fashion.”⁶

Clearly, many enslaved Africans identified with a universal God, but their concept of Jesus emerged in a different way. Jesus was a co-sufferer, an available presence that was identifiable. Jesus became personal savior and friend for the African American and this view of Jesus became a part of their theology. It became a part of their hermeneutic and a part of their concept of family. The following African American Spiritual speaks to that special relationship:

*There's not a friend like the lowly Jesus
No not one
No not one
Jesus knows all about my troubles,
He will guide me till the day is done,
There's not a friend like the lowly Jesus
No not one
No not one
(Author Unknown: African American Spiritual)*

While many African Americans adopted the Old Testament story of deliverance from bondage as a part of their theology of hope, the reality of the present drove them to appropriate the New Testament concept of family as a way of existing during their time of oppression. For many motherless, fatherless people, the appeal of the Gospel's "Kingdom of God" became a way of creating spiritual family where none existed.

"First, Jesus' teachings fundamentally center on the vision of the kingdom of God as a new household. As such, they accentuate disciplined, quality relationships based on a divine solidarity and kinship, not on traditional blood relations. The blood of Jesus Christ redefines what it means to be family members in the Household of God."⁷

(Recordings: God Bless the Child (Aretha Franklin))

Dr. Felder asserts that the interpretation of family for African Americans who experienced this fracture can be found in their response to the Gospel. The conditions of African Americans led them to much of the same eschatological theology of the early church and like them, they, too, were forced to denounce bloodline families and embrace in their theology and their interpretation, the Household of God. In this family, there were no slaves, no free, just a oneness in the family of God. In the heart, mind and faith of the slave, the cosmic spiritual battle for freedom had been fought and won. So that they were able to sing:

*Victory is mine
Victory is mine
Victory, today, is mine
I told Satan to get thee behind
Victory, today, is mine
(Author unknown: African American Spiritual)*

In other words, family became not bloodline, but faith community, with all seeking to be in the Household of God. For many of the early slave churches, prior to being accepted into the faith community, one had to "bear" witness to his/her conversion experience. That act gave them a place in the community, earned them the familial title of "brother"

or “sister” and with the “right hand of fellowship” guaranteed them a seat at the family table of God.

*You been my mother,
You been my father
You been by sister
My brother too
Oh you brought me
Yes, you brought from a mighty, a mighty long way
(Author Unknown: African American Spiritual)*

This Christian concept of family explains why looking at the church is one of the best ways to trace values in the African American Christian community. The primacy of the church makes it the vehicle for dispensing values such as: perseverance, justice, love and hope.

4. The Black Church and Values

*Sometimes, I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes, I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes, I feel like a motherless child
A long way from home, a long way from home
(Author Unknown: African American Spiritual)*

Recordings: Sometimes I feel like a Motherless Child (Jessye Norman)

While some sociologists may speak of bloodline and kinship, African Americans speak of faith communities. The institution of the faithful—the church, replaces the institution of the family and the village. The road to spiritual and religious freedom for African Americans was full of obstacles. --none more difficult than the American religious piety, that helped to get them to their new home.

“Manifest Destiny” drove many European settlers in America to believe not only that this was the “promised land” for them, but that their newly acquired status as “owners” of the land also meant that they were responsible for the Christian conversion of the “savages” in their midst. In many places in the country this meant the Native Americans, whom they considered pagans and the African slaves, whom they considered less than human.

“In this period (1800’s) of expansion many churchmen tried to give theological expression to the concept of American destiny. The early New England Puritans had seen their theocracies as God’s new Israel, a ‘wilderness Zion,’ which occupied a central place in God’s plan for (hu)mankind. In the era of the Revolution the theme had been renewed and brought up to date by patriotic clergymen. God they then said, was bringing to birth a new nation to serve him... God was expanding American power because the “Anglo-Saxons” were his chosen agents to bring blessing to the world... Home mission needs caused many clerical promoters to give renewed emphasis to America’s great destiny under God... The Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-American, of all modern races, possesses the strongest national character and the one best fitted for universal dominion, not a dominion of despotism but one, which makes its subjects free citizens.” Schaff saw America’s grandiose world role based, not on any moral superiority on its part, but on God’s inscrutable providence. The idea of manifest destiny, which loomed so large in the general history of this period, was partly rooted in and supported by religious sanctions.”⁸

Clearly, African Americans could not embrace the theology of manifest destiny. Out of their struggle for religious and spiritual freedom, enslaved African Americans began their own spiritual quest and identity. The Christianization of slaves was not always a desirable position for European Americans. Although their piety dictated conversion of slaves—the uncomfortable Christian ethics—love, brotherhood and equality under God—caused European Americans to struggle with what to do about enslaved Christians.

Although Methodist churches introduced Christian education into their missions toward slaves, Anglican churches refused to educate the slave because it was against the law. Baptist churches welcomed African Americans, but did not allow them to become a part of the leadership of the church. Northern Congregationalists, Quakers and a handful of other protestant churches created abolitionist societies and supported the new wave of independent African American churches. In the South slaves were prohibited from congregating in large numbers and church meetings in European American churches relegated them to separate quarters in the balcony of the church. This segregation existed in both Protestant and Catholic Churches in the North as well.

“African Americans were treated as second-class citizens in the predominantly Caucasian churches to which they belonged. It was common practice for pews to be provided for them in reserved sections of the churches...in some churches, blacks could commune only after whites had done so; in others they could neither vote nor serve in any official capacity. Segregated sections for African Americans were provided in church cemeteries so that the moldering dust of blacks and whites might not become mingled, even after death. Not every congregation followed every one of these discriminatory practices, but no major Protestant body was free from some taint of racist thought and practice.”⁹

While much of the impetus for the creation of new communities of faith centered on these segregated practices, what was more evident was that there was an emerging theology, and religious fervor among African Americans. The biblical message for most African Americans represented a liberating hope, this despite efforts by European American Christians to literally keep the New Testament Gospel—Good News—away from the slaves and later from unlearned African Americans.

“Blacks also separated from white congregations because they felt that the souls of their fellows were being insufficiently attended to by white churchmen. The African American churchmen in Philadelphia offered as partial explanation for their withdrawal the need to preserve, as much as possible, from the crafty wiles of the enemy (the devil) our weak-minded brethren, taking offense at such partiality (segregated practice) as they might be led to think contrary to the spirit of the Gospel, in which there is neither male nor female, barbarian nor Scythian, bond nor free, but all are one in Christ Jesus...to black Americans, one of the most galling aspects of their bondage was the fact that they were not considered to be human. To be human was to be free, to some extent, to deploy the resources one owned. In the light of this perception, their founders of their own humanity must see the rise of separate congregations fundamentally as an assertion. Separate congregations epitomized the desire to exert power and control over some area of their lives, which they understood was inherent in being human”¹⁰

Separate communities of faith took hold in many free African American communities. Between 1787 and 1907 African Americans founded more than a dozen major Christian communities of faith. {See Chart B} Today these denominations account for the majority of the Christian congregations among African Americans. These faith

communities became the place from which the values of a community were espoused—love, perseverance, courage, hope and justice. These churches reinforced the faith of the people. They gave them weekly inspiration and courage. They assured them that God was there with them and for them. They petitioned, prayed and interceded on behalf of a suffering people. This is where the values of the people were formed and fed. Without control of their lives, and the lack of stability of the family, people needed the church—the church replaced the village and the Spiritual replaced the proverbs as a genre through which values and wisdom were propagated. These churches were the repository of the history and the stories of the struggle of African Americans. They became the place where family was created and sustained and they were home to the music of a people—the African American Spirituals and later the Gospel music. The church was more than that; it was also the center for prophetic proclamations and calls for justice.

“Every Black church is involved with both (priestly and prophetic) functions. Priestly functions involve only those activities concerned with worship and maintaining the spiritual life of members; church maintenance activities are the major thrust. Prophetic functions refer to involvement in political concerns and activities in the wider community; classically, prophetic activity has meant pronouncing a radical word of God’s judgment...Priestly churches are bastions of survival and prophetic churches are networks of liberation.”¹¹

5. Social Justice—a Value of the Black Church

The newly formed independent Black church denominations were the basis for the major social justice movements of the African American community. In their early years they participated in the Abolitionist movement and the American Colonization Society, which repatriated blacks in the de facto American and British colonies of Liberia and Sierra Leone. These denominations later were the fertile soil for the modern Civil Rights movement that put years of social justice theology into practice. The paramount value of this movement was the love ethic of Jesus. This legacy of the African American Church touched almost every corner of the world.

“The pope (Pope John Paul II), Bishop Tutu, and Archbishop Romero offer glittering examples of the power of religion to provoke and support social justice. But God’s power to transform society has no greater example than the U.S. Civil Rights movement. In America’s battle with itself over slavery, legal segregation, and civil rights laws, the power of faith has been the cornerstone of efforts to save a nation’s soul...Unlike the pope or the bishops, who built their struggle with the help of an established church, the African American freedom struggle began outside any organized (mainline white) religion. As slaves, black Americans were stripped away from organized worship. They came to God not through the church but through faith.”¹²

In the 1960’s, the Black church built upon the foundation of the slave religion, provided the vehicle through which the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would petition for justice. He was nourished and given a platform to lead one of the most effective liberating social

justice movements in the world. His pronouncement of the love ethic of Jesus as a main value underlying the Civil Rights movement became one of the most profound manifestations of the praxis of Jesus' Gospel of love and non-violence. This community of faith that African Americans adopted as their family issued forth to its people the challenge to confront the strongest nation in the world with the love ethic of Jesus as a core value for seeking justice.

This legacy has endured for nearly half a century and has been the inspiration for freedom and justice movements from Africa to Eastern Europe. If we were to name a value for African Americans as shaped by the church it would be justice. The means by which that justice is to be sought as evident in the theology of the Black Church's Civil Rights Movement is non-violence. Dr. King says it best:

*"Means and ends must cohere because the end is preexistent in the means, and ultimately destructive means cannot bring about constructive ends. The means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek."*¹³

6. The African American Spiritual as a genre for conveying wisdom and values

As the Black Church spoke to the values of the people, the African American Spiritual carried that message from church to field to town and eventually to the world. From Mahatma Gandhi to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the African American Spiritual has contributed to the spiritual energy of major religious figures around the globe because it carries within it the African American story, the repository of its faith, hope and dreams. In his prison cell in Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about how he sang African American Spirituals as a part of his daily devotional. The theologian Howard Thurman recounts a time when a group of African Americans visited Mahatma Gandhi in India and he asked them to sing the very well-known Spiritual: "Were You There?"

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble;
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

(Recordings: Were you There? (Sam Cooke and Jessye Norman)

"The inference is that the singer was there: 'I know what he went through because I have met him in the high places of pain, and I claim him as my brother,'" says Thurman as he interprets this message. It is a way to send a message to the community that they have a brother in their struggle—hold on, persevere and have hope. Howard Thurman is one of a number of theologians who have studied and written about the African American Spiritual. The scholarship has produced a body of work that examines the Spiritual as a repository of values, as a coded language of an enslaved people, as a genre through which the prophetic word of a people can be heard and as an art form that is without peer. {See Chart C}

“The ante-bellum Negro preacher was the greatest, single factor in determining the spiritual destiny of the slave community. He it (sic) was who gave to the masses of his fellows a point of view that became for them a veritable Door of Hope. His ministry was greatly restricted as to movement, function, and opportunities of leadership, but he himself was blessed with one important insight: he was convinced that every human being was a child of God...When he spoke to his group on an occasional Sabbath day, he knew what they had lived through during the weeks; how their total environment had conspired to put in their minds and spirits the corroding notion that as human beings they were of no significance. Thus his one message springing full grown from the mind of God repeated in many ways a wide range of variations: “You are created in God’s image. You are not slaves, you are not ‘niggers’; you are God’s children.” Many weary spiritually and physically exhausted slaves found new strength and power gushing up into all the reaches of their personalities, inspired by the words that fell from this man’s lips. He had discovered that which religion insists is the ultimate truth about human life and destiny. It is the supreme validation of the human spirit...it is out of this sense of being a child of God that the genius of the religious folk songs is born.”¹⁴

Howard Thurman states that the foundations of the Spiritual were three-fold: The Bible, the world of nature and the personal experiences of religion that were a part of the people’s inner life. The origin of the African American Spiritual is unknown. There is evidence of its beginning as far back as the 1400’s when Africans captured by Portuguese began singing songs of lament. Others trace it to the early 1800’s; still others have evidence of the songs before the Revolutionary War. In 1862, “*Roll Jordan Roll*” is said to have appeared in sheet music produced by William Francis Allen and others. However, on paper the songs lost their meaning. It was not until the Fisk Jubilee singers toured the Midwestern and North Eastern United States in the post-slavery era of 1860’s that the world took notice.¹⁵

Similar to the African Proverbs, the African American Spirituals belonged to the community. The community of faith used them as a common language of hope, faith, courage and perseverance. They served as a basis for bringing together people who had lost connection with family and spiritual ancestry.

“The New World African’s accommodation of the slave master’s religion and the retention of Africanisms produced the Jesus-faith of the antebellum slave which remains identifiable today. That Jesus-faith which was preserved for posterity in the Spirituals served to insulate the antebellum slave from the real temptation of collective suicide. The Negro Spirituals fashioned by the slave warrens of the South provided the foundation which authenticated the Black religious experience.”¹⁶

One popular Spiritual that speaks of the values and inner-spiritual yearnings of African Americans is the song *Deep River*. Sung all over the world and made famous by the

singer Paul Robeson, this song not only speaks to the natural barriers that kept the slave from freedom—rivers; but it also spoke to the sense of their lives and what it meant to slowly allow God to move them during their time of strife.

*Deep River, my home is over Jordan;
Deep River, my home is over Jordan.
O' don't you want to go to that Gospel Feast?
That Promised Land where all is Peace?
Deep River, I want to cross over into campground.*

The African American Spiritual has been woven throughout this paper as topics regarding family, values or the church have been raised. It is the genius of this music and its poignant meanings that have enriched, not only the ethical foundation of African Americans, but they have also instructed the world about the devastation and ultimate failure of slavery.

7. The Creation of Values for Women, Mothers and Wives

“How did African women transform themselves into today’s African American women? What was the process that they used to re-envision their lives as women of God and not slaves of men? How did they move from the mantle of oppression to the altar of praise; from the bottom of the slave ship to the halls of Congress? ... What can oppressed women around the world learn from the faith journeys of African American women?”¹⁷

The question facing any oppressed people according to Howard Thurman is “under what terms is survival possible?” African American women answered that question by seeking solace in their relationship with God and working through the varied communities of faith in the African American tradition. These institutions—families of God—affirmed their humanity and gave them resources to reach inside themselves and draw upon intrinsic values that affirmed their womanhood after the attempted degradation of slavery.

The social definitions of wife, mother and woman were denied to the slaves. Unable to marry or experience the protection offered by family or husband, unable to rear the offspring of their wombs; and unable to prevent sexual assaults, African women in America were threatened with total loss of the definition of who they were on this American soil. However, through their family of faith they persevered and re-created themselves by establishment of an ethic of womanhood that both acknowledged their struggles and affirmed their value as women of God. Embracing the virtues of justice, hope, love, faith, and perseverance these women defined the manner in which they would survive in an alien and strange land.

“A historic snapshot of nearly four centuries of Black women reveals that they were able to forge dignity out of degradation and hope out of despair, not only for themselves, but also for their families and their race. By uplifting Christian

virtues and clinging to a boundless faith, they measured their value and worth in God's human family."¹⁸

The tribal world of Africa offered comfort in tradition and communal understanding. Once in America, Africans were unable to attain such support. Perhaps some of the familial and tribal proverbs of Africa rested in the hearts and minds of newly enslaved African women. However, the proverb, "As long as a child has a mother, it has its meal" would prove a hollow and haunting thought for an enslaved African woman whose child had just been sold to a far-away plantation owner. It would more likely give birth in her words of the spiritual, "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child".

African American women never gave up. The value of perseverance became one of their cornerstones, as they sought ways to re-establish their womanhood and their dignity. Through the development of organizations, clubs, church missions and schools based on Christian virtues, African American women began the process of renewing and re-inventing themselves in America.

One such example was Mary McLeod Bethune.

"Mary McLeod Bethune was indeed a woman who was a major contributor to the cult of black womanhood. Born in 1875, Bethune founded the institution now known as Bethune Cookman College, the only historically black college founded by an African American woman that continues to survive today. She was also a founder of the National Council of Negro Women, a thriving organization devoted to the improvement of conditions for women and children.

In 1904 in Florida, Bethune started the Daytona Educational and Industrial Institute, the predecessor to the college, 'with five girls, a dollar and a half and faith in God.' By 1920, forty-seven girls had completed the full high school course, and ten taught in the public school system in Florida. She later became an advisor to the U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt... In her later years, Bethune traveled to Europe to champion the cause of African American women."¹⁹

Perhaps the essence of this spiritual legacy of African American women can be found in the last will and testament of Mary McLeod Bethune. She wrote these words:

"Sometimes I ask myself if I have any legacy to leave. Truly, my worldly possessions are few. Yet my experiences have been rich. From them I have distilled principles and policies in which I believe firmly, for they represent the meaning of my life's work. They are the products of much sweat and sorrow. Perhaps, in them there is something of value. So as my life draws to a close, I will pass them on to Negroes everywhere in the hope that an old woman's philosophy may give them inspiration. Here then is my legacy...I leave you love...I leave you hope...I leave you the challenge of developing confidence in one

another...I leave you a thirst for education...I leave you respect for the use of power...I leave you faith...I leave you racial dignity...I leave you a desire to live harmoniously with your fellow man...I leave you finally a responsibility to our young people."²⁰

Mary McLeod Bethune was one of many African American women who fought hard and long to create places where the value of African American women could be strengthened and where their aspirations could be realized. It has been a long journey from the bottom of the slave ship to the halls of Congress and the corridors of the White House, but they were strong in their faith and steadfast in their belief that God had created them as worthwhile and worthy human beings. They fought for the dignity that they sought and they passed it on to generations yet unborn. {See Chart D}

8. Conclusion

This paper attempts to describe the strength and the wisdom that can emerge out of a people for whom traditional and spiritual disconnection produces chaos. The spiritual chaos that was the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade miraculously produced an exiled people who reached for and found an unchanging God who gave them a new name, a new family and a new song to share with new generations.

They composed sacred music that was pregnant with the hope of a better tomorrow and the history and wisdom from the struggles of yesterday. Embedded in their struggles were the seeds to re-invent, re-create and re-invigorate future generations to seek justice and to re-establish their dignity as valued members of humanity. In many instances, African Americans through their suffering were able to achieve what the early Christian mystics, monks, and martyrs' achieved—a faith that transcended theological and theoretical belief in God. Theirs was an experiential spirituality. They believed that each member of the Trinity was at work on their behalf for their liberation. God was the omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient Deity and Deliverer. This faith they brought from their African cosmology. In Christianity, Jesus was the co-sufferer who empathized with their plight. This they found through their struggles. The Holy Spirit gave life, energy, hope, and spiritual sustenance to believers to endure the daily vicissitudes of a difficult life. This they felt in their heart. The Triune God was severable. Through their intimate spirituality Africans enslaved in America created a spiritual survival theology that reinvented family through faith communities inspired by the messages of the Gospel.

We have seen that the social justice that African Americans so fervently sought and received, in large measure, inspired many oppressed people around the world to seek freedom and justice. Yet, much remains to be done. Perhaps this legacy and story of spiritual restoration can be used to bring hope to the 21st Century Diaspora spawned by the attempts at genocide in Rwanda and the Sudan; the civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia; the ethnic cleansing in Croatia and Bosnia and the Middle Eastern wars of devastation and displacement in Iraq, and in Israel and Palestine. If there is wisdom to be culled out of the African American faith journey, let it be used to inspire hope in the oppressed, the refugee and the war-torn weary. Perhaps the same kind of faith journey

resulting from the spiritual chaos of the enslaved African in America will hold potential for wholeness and healing for those in the 21st Century Diaspora. We can only pray that the world's refugees and oppressed will find that there exists the possibility for the institution of a "new thing", to be achieved through an abiding faith in a steadfast Creator and we can only pray that those who oppress, whether by force, by wealth or by doctrine, will also learn what it means to "love they neighbor as thyself".

Chart A
Africans Transported by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade
1450-1900

Angolan Africans were sent to:

Barbados; Brazil; Cuba; Haiti; Jamaica; U.S.A. (Mississippi, South Carolina, and Virginia)

Gold Coast (Ghana) Africans were sent to:

Jamaica, U.S. A. (Virginia, South Carolina)

Mozambique Africans were sent to:

Cuba; Haiti; Jamaica; Mexico; Peru

Sierra Leone Africans were sent to:

Brazil; Cuba; French Guiana; Puerto Rico; Guadeloupe; Haiti; Jamaica; Peru; Martinique; Mexico; U.S.A. (Mississippi)

Nigerian Africans were sent to:

Brazil; British Guiana; Cuba; Haiti; Jamaica; St. Croix; St. Thomas

Northern Nigerian Africans were sent to:

West Indies

Senegambia (Senegal and Gambia) Africans were sent to:

Barbados; Brazil; Cuba; U.S.A. (Mississippi, South Carolina, and Virginia)

Source: Genealogical Encyclopedia of the Colonial Americas, edited by Christiana K. Schaefer. Genealogical Publishing Company, Baltimore, Md., 1998. (As it appears in Come this Far by Faith, p. 13.)

Chart B
African American Independent Faith Communities
1800-1910

1787: Richard Allen and Absalom Jones and others founded the **African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.)** in Philadelphia after walking out of the St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church. They currently sponsor seven colleges and seminaries in America. They support training schools in Liberia, a publishing house in South Africa; education centers in Lesotho and schools in Malawi, Zimbabwe, Jamaica, St. Croix, Haiti, London and Johannesburg. They currently have nearly 4 million members and over 8,000 churches.

1796: James Varick left the John Street Methodist Church in New York and founded the **African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (A.M.E. Zion)**. The church supports Livingstone College, Hood Theological Seminary, Clinton Junior College, and Loma-Hannon Junior College. Today they have a membership of approximately 1.5 million and 6,000 congregations worldwide.

1805: William Anderson, Peter Spencer and 40 other Black members of the Asbury Methodist Church in Wilmington, Delaware founded the **Union American Methodist Episcopal Church, Inc.** Today it has nearly 15,000 members in 55 congregations.

1829: Elizabeth Clovis Lange was a refugee from Haiti who founded the **Congregation of the Oblate Sisters of Providence**. The order was one of the first for African Americans in the United States.

1851: Rebecca Cox Jackson had a conversion after a thunderstorm and became a leader in the Shaker movement in America. The Shakers, known officially as the **United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Coming**, emphasize personal spiritual experience and celibacy. Cox Jackson left the group in New York and moved to Philadelphia and formed an order of **Black Shakers**.

1866: Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (C.M.E.) was formed after the African American members of the Methodist Episcopal Church South petitioned the main body for a separate church.

1874: Freed slaves who chose to separate from the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and constitute a new denomination that expressed their freedom founded **Second Cumberland Presbyterian Church**.

1884: Elias Camp Morris founded **Arkansas Baptist College** and was elected president of the National Baptist Convention in 1895.

1895: The National Baptist Convention was founded. In 1896 it established a publishing house and began printing a series of Sunday school materials for use in its various churches. The National Baptist Convention currently has 30,000 churches with over 7 1/2 million congregants. The National Baptist Convention later split and lost some of its members to the Progressive National Convention:

1961: Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc. was born during the height of the civil rights movement in America. It currently has 1.2 million persons and over 1,000 churches. It supports a number of universities and colleges: Chicago Baptist Theological Seminary; Morehouse School of Religion; Virginia Union University School of Theology, Shaw Divinity School, Morris College and Howard University School of Divinity.

1897: Charles Mason started The Church of God in Christ. Today it is one of the largest denominations of African Americans in the U.S.

1905: Rev. E.D. Brown founded **The Free Christian Zion Church of Christ in Arkansas.**

1905: Immigrants from the West Indies founded **United Wesleyan Methodist Church of America.**

1906: William J. Seymour was one of the founders of the **American Pentecostal movement.** He ignited the country with his **Azusa Street Revivals and Mission.** It was an inter-racial, international coming together of people who experienced ecstatic emotional and spiritual feelings resulting in shouting, speaking in tongues and proclamations of the Holy Ghost. It took place in 1906, when much of America was gripped by the violence of white mobs attacking African Americans in the streets of Illinois, Texas and Georgia. Seymour expressed the Pentecostal movement's theological basis in a newspaper entitled *Apostolic Faith*. His long ranging effect is present today not only in America, but around the world.

1907: Charles Price Jones was a Baptist minister who founded what became known as the **Church of Christ (Holiness) USA.** He was also the author of over 1,000 Gospel songs.

Sources: Directory of African American Religious Bodies: A Compendium by the Howard University School of Divinity. Ed. Wardell J. Payne, Howard University Press, Washington, D.C., 1991; and Juan Williams and Quinton Dixie, Ph.D., Come this Far by Faith, William Morrow, NY, 2003.

Chart C
Sample of African American Spirituals

(Enslaved Africans were not allowed to attach their names to songs they may have authored)

Spirituals coming out of Personal Experience

Free at Last

(A song whose words were made popular by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.)

*Free at last, free at last
Thank God a'mighty I'm free at last.*

*Surely been 'buked,
And surely been scorned,
Thank God a'mighty, I'm free at last.
But still my soul is –a heaven born,
Thank God a'mighty, I'm free at last*

*Just follow me down to Jordan's stream,
Oh, thank God a'mighty, I'm free at last!*

Make Heaven my Home

*I am a poor pilgrim of sorrow
I'm tossed in this wide world alone,
No hope have I for tomorrow,
I've started to make Heaven my Home*

*Sometimes I am tossed and driven, Lord,
Sometimes I don't know where to roam
I've heard of a city called Heaven
I've started to make it my home.*

This Little Light of Mine

*This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine,
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine,
This little light of mine
I'm gonna let it shine,
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine*

God is so High

*God is so high, you can't get over Him,
He's so low, you can't get under Him,
He's so wide, you can't get around Him,
You must come in, by and through the Lamb*

I Want Jesus to Walk with Me

*I want Jesus to walk with me;
I want Jesus to walk with me;
All along my pilgrim journey,
Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me*

*I want Jesus to hold my hand,
I want Jesus to hold my hand
Through my trials, tribulations,
Lord, I want Jesus to hold my hand*

Change My Name

*I told Jesus it would be all right,
If he changed my name,
I told Jesus it would be all right,
If he changed my name,
I told Jesus it would be all right,
Be all right, be all right,
I told Jesus it would be all right
If he changed my name*

Standing in the Need of Prayer

*Not my brother, nor my sister
But it's me old Lord, standing in the need of prayer
Not my brother, nor my sister
But it's me old Lord, standing in the need of prayer
It's me, It's me O Lord
Standing in the need of prayer;
It's me, It's me O Lord,
Standing in the need of prayer*

Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray

*Couldn't hear nobody pray,
O' couldn't hear nobody pray,
O' way down yonder by myself
And I couldn't hear nobody pray*

O Freedom

*Oh, freedom
Oh, freedom
Oh, freedom over me!
And before I'd be a slave,
I'll be buried in my grave,
And go home to my Lord and be free*

Steal Away

*Steal Away, steal away
Steal away to Jesus
Steal away, steal away home
I ain't got long to stay here!*

*My Lord he calls me,
He calls me by the thunder;
The trumpet sounds within-a my soul,
I ain't got long to stay here!*

Over my Head

*Over my head I hear music in the air
Over my head I hear music in the air
Over my head I hear music in the air
There must be a God somewhere
Over my head I hear laughter in the air
Over my head I hear laughter in the air

Over my head I hear laughter in the air
There must be a God somewhere*

Songs coming out of the Old Testament stories of Deliverance:

Joshua fit the Battle of Jericho

*Joshua fit the Battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho
Joshua fit the Battle of Jericho,
And the walls come tumbling down!
You may talk about your King of Gideon,
You may talk about your man of Saul,
But there's none like good ole Joshua,
At the Battle of Jericho*

Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel

*Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
And why not-a every man?*

*He delivered Daniel from the lion's den,
Jonah from the belly of the whale,
And the Hebrew children from the fiery furnace,
And why not-a every man?*

Go Down Moses

*When Israel was in Egypt's land,
Let my people go;
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let my people go;*

*Go down, Moses, 'way down in Egypt's land;
Tell ole Pharaoh
Let my people go.*

Balm in Gilead

*There is a balm in Gilead,
To make the wounded whole,
There is a balm in Gilead,
To heal the sin-sick soul*

*Sometimes I feel discouraged
And think my works in vain*

*But then the Holy Spirit
Revives my soul again*

*There is a balm in Gilead
To make the wounded whole,
There is a balm in Gilead,
To heal the sin-sick soul*

We are Climbing Jacob's Ladder

*We are climbing Jacob's ladder
We are climbing Jacob's ladder,
We are climbing Jacob's ladder,
Soldiers of the cross.*

*Every round goes higher 'n higher,
Every round goes higher 'n higher
Every round goes higher 'n higher,
Soldier of the cross*

Spirituals coming out of Nature:

Wade in the Water

*Wade in the water, Wade in the water, children
Wade in the water,
God's a gonna trouble the water!*

*Wade in the water, Wade in the water, children
Wade in the water
God's a gonna trouble the water!*

Chart D
Partial List of Significant African American Women of Faith

Sojourner Truth (1797-1883) born Isabella Baumfree, was a slave in Ulster County, New York. Sojourner experienced a conversion and walked away from her slaveholder and declared herself free. She changed her name and became an abolitionist and an evangelist.

Nannie Helen Burroughs (1883-1961) founded the National Trade and Professional School for Girls in Washington, D.C. in 1907 with the slogan: “The highest development of Christian womanhood.” The school maintained a close relationship between religion and education. Ms. Burroughs also served in a number of capacities in the National Baptist Convention.

Jarena Lee (1783-unknown) became the first woman authorized to preach in the AME Church. She was authorized to preach by its founder Richard Allen. Her call to the ministry came early in life after a very powerful religious conversion. She did not act on it until later in life.

Shirley Chisholm, (1924-present) was the first Black woman elected to Congress. She was elected in 1969 and served until 1983. In the 1970’s she ran for President of the U.S. in the Democratic primaries. (Almost two dozen African American women have served in the U.S. Congress since her election.)

Lucie E. Campbell (1885-1963) wrote over a hundred hymns. She was in charge of music for the National Baptist Convention for a number of years.

Mary Ann Shadd Cary (?-1893) founded a school in Toronto and in 1883 graduated from Howard University becoming the second Black woman to earn a law degree in America.

Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955) was an educator, churchwoman and advisor to presidents. Mary McLeod Bethune was the first African American woman to establish a 4-year accredited college in America—Bethune Cookman College.

Harriet Tubman (1821-1913) was considered the Moses of her people because of her enormous courage in conducting hundreds of slaves to freedom in the North through the Underground Railroad.

Bishop Vashti McKenzie in 2001 became the first female Bishop of the AME Church. (Since that time two additional women have been named Bishop.)

Rev. Bernice Powell Jackson was elected in the summer of 2004 as the North American President of the World Council of Churches. She is a United Church of Christ Minister.

Endnotes

¹ (The terms African American, Negro and Black or Black American are used within their historically appropriate context and interchangeably at times all of which refer to the same category of people—former African slaves and their descendants in America)

² Cain Hope Felder, ed., The Original African Heritage Study Bible: King James Version, The James C. Winston Publishing Company: Washington, D.C. 1993, pp. 1816-17.

³ Peter J. Paris, The Spirituality of African People: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse, Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1995, 89.

⁴ Juan Williams and Quinton Dixie, Ph.d., Come this Far by Faith: Stories from the African American Religious Experience, William Morrow Press: N.Y. 2003, p.13-14.

⁵ Ibid, p. 78.

⁶ Ibid., p. 80.

⁷ Cain Hope Felder, Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class and Family, Orbis Books: Maryknoll, N.Y., 1989. p. 161.

⁸ H. Shelton Smith; Robert T. Handy; Lefferts A. Loetscher, American Christianity 1820-1960. Volume II, Charles Scribner's Sons: NY. 1963. pp. 4-5.

⁹ Wardell J. Payne, ed., Directory of African American Religious Bodies: A Compendium by the Howard University School of Divinity, Howard University Press: Washington, D.C., 1991, p. 2.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 3.

¹¹ Eric C. Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, The Black Church in the African American Experience, Duke University Press: Durham and London. 1990, p. 12

¹² Williams and Dixie, Come This Far By Faith, p.1.

¹³ Alex Ayres, ed., The Wisdom of Martin Luther King, Jr., Meridan: New York, 1993, pp.150-151.

¹⁴ Howard Thurman, Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death, Friends United Press: Richmond, Indiana, 1975, pp. 17-18.

¹⁵ John Lovell, Jr., Black Song: The Forge and the Flame: The Story of How the Afro-American Spiritual Was Hammered Out, The Macmillan Company: New York, 1972, pp. 400-401.

¹⁶ Wyatt Tee Walker, Somebody's Calling My Name: Black Sacred Music and Social Change, Judson Press: Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, 1979, p.20.

¹⁷ LaVerne M. Gill, Daughters of Dignity: African Biblical Women and the Virtues of Black Womanhood, Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, Ohio, 2000. p. xiv.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. xv.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp.70-71.

²⁰ Julianne Malveaux, ed., Voices of Visions: African American Women on the Issues, National Council of Negro Women: Washington, D.C. 1996, pp. 309-12.