

SOULS A'FIRE 2

The Second National Conference of the African American Roundtable

Convened in Chicago (June 2005)

**A Project of
The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies
in Religion and Ministry
at Pacific School of Religion**

Summary Report

In June, 2005, the CLGS African American Roundtable (AART) convened its second national conference, *SOULS A'FIRE 2*, on the campus of Chicago Theological Seminary. Under the leadership of Johari Jabir, the AART brought together scholars, pastors and activists to explore the critically important intersections of race, gender, sexuality and religion, not only in and among historic black churches but also in newly emerging congregational models.

SOULS A'FIRE 2 offered both rigorous academic presentations as well as thought-provoking autobiographical reflections on black religious culture. Four panels of speakers considered topics ranging from the religious construction of masculinity to black church families and reclaiming Stonewall. The following report provides a glimpse of these conference panels by summarizing the arguments made in the papers and quoting directly from the reflections of the panelists. As the work of the AART continues, CLGS is committed to making this pioneering work more widely available through the CLGS website as well as other publishing venues.

I.

WRAPPED UP, TIED UP, AND TANGLED UP: THE POLITICS OF AESTHETIC MALENESS AND MASCULINITY IN BLACK RELIGIOUS CULTURE

The historical development of the black church as a cultural, social, and political institution in black communities is perceived as a movement led primarily by black men. The dominating presence of black male scholars in black religious studies, including sociology, theology, and historiography coincides with the majority presence of male leadership in black churches. This panel consisted of scholars, clergy, and artists across denominations and disciplines, all of whom engaged in a critical discussion regarding the aesthetics of black worship, the cultural meanings of charisma, and problems and challenges of hegemonic black religious masculinity. The following is a summary of just a few of their insights and observations.

1. Back to the Basics: The Black Church as a Sleeping Giant

Victor Anderson (Vanderbilt University)

The Black Church in American society remains one of the most powerful sites of empowerment for black communities. While the black church has been historically and continues to be an advocate for the oppressed and marginalized, this has not been true for black gays and lesbians, many of whom are relegated to positions such as musicians, gospel singers, and choir directors. These non-contested places of grotesque masculinity are manifested in the glorifying of caricatures such as sissies, girls, and first ladies. These are not, however, safe places to affirm sexual difference. In terms of sex and power, the black church – its members and its ministers – are overwhelmingly conservative. A 2003 survey of black churches indicated, for example, that 74 percent regarded homosexuality as sinful; 62 percent strongly disapproved of gay men and lesbians; 51 percent believed homosexuality can be changed; and all believed that same-sex marriage is morally wrong and undermines traditional family values. Despite the pervasive poverty in black America, the devastation of HIV/AIDS in black communities, and the mass incarceration of black young males, same-sex marriage has been the most galvanizing issue in the black church. The debate has forged new coalitions between black church leaders and white conservative evangelicals and their constituencies in which some of the most virulent rhetoric against same-sex marriage has come from black ministers who criticized LGBT activists for equating the civil rights aspect of marriage equality with the civil rights movement.

2. The Charismatic Political Aesthetic: The Aesthetics of Charisma in the New Kingdom.

Erica Edwards (Duke University)

On December 11, 2004, 25,000 persons participated in a march from the Atlanta King Center led by Reverend Bernice King and Bishop Eddie Long entitled, “Re-Igniting the Legacy.” The use of the King Center was intended as a symbol of reverence and respect for the cultural memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. The message and impact of this march had as much to do with its form as its content. It produced a symbolic charismatic leader in a way that focuses attention on questions of aesthetic value. As Max Weber noted, it is not what the leader is but what the people see the leader as that constitutes the relationship. In that regard, the march used the following symbols.

First, in terms of place, the King Center linked the current event with Martin Luther King, Jr. as the historical embodiment of civil rights and justice, which re-connected the participants with the King legacy itself. Second, in terms of leadership, Bishop Long’s own physical presence symbolized the masculinity of King himself. It encouraged traditional notions of manhood and it attached charismatic leadership to a rigid heterosexual representation of identity. Third, in terms of ritual, the march was a strange mix of political rally, Olympic opening ceremony, funeral procession, soldier march, and worship service. More importantly, it demonstrated how charismatic leadership masks itself as natural and how this “charismatic political aesthetic” is used to police African American sexuality, to align black religious groups with the family and

moral-values agenda of the right, and to keep ideas of manhood tangled up with models of religious and political leaders that rely on unyielding categories of gender and sexuality. For Black Americans, charisma as a form of authority has become an organizing myth of social organization and raises some key questions. Is charismatic authority an acceptable means for black leadership? What is the church's investment in a patriarchal distinction between top and bottom as it relates to its leaders and followers?

3. (Re)Imagining the Black Male Heterosexual

Dwight Hopkins (University of Chicago)

(Re)imagining black religious identity requires a particular process of self critique for the black religious male who self-identifies as heterosexual. A starting point for such a process requires the black religious heterosexual male to consider what it means to be human. Seeing the humanity in all of God's creation allows the black religious heterosexual male to see his own humanity in those who are oppressed, including black LGBT persons in the black church. Black LGBT persons reflect the diversity and healthy creativity of the image of God, which is reincarnated in real human flesh. Therefore, to (re)imagine the religious identity of black male heterosexuals requires freedom and a comprehensive love that not only embraces and celebrates the diverse creativity of God, but also recognizes a shared humanity in those who are gay. Pursuing the dimensions of love and freedom allows the black male heterosexual to fully become himself. A biblical view of creation would understand the gift of creation as given to all humanity without any privileges, a biblical drama of moving persons out of corporate slavery into communities of freedom. To love is to live out the image of God and the mission of God. The heterosexual black male should not perceive Jesus to be a symbol of heterosexual masculinity who acts on heterosexual privilege. In this regard, the black religious heterosexual male must be a traitor to heterosexism. In the black church, the black religious heterosexual male must be attentive to the directions and distributions of power as it pertains to the privileging of hegemonic masculinities.

4. Camp Revival: Queering Black Masculinity in the Black Church

E. Patrick Johnson (Northwestern University)

In 1991, The Black Church mourned the loss of the King of Gospel Music – Reverend James Cleveland. While most reports stated that Cleveland died of natural causes, most in the black gay and lesbian community knew that he had died from complications due to HIV/AIDS. After his death, a former lover of Cleveland filed a suit against Cleveland's estate, claiming that Cleveland knowingly infected him with the HIV virus. The truly troubling aspect of the Cleveland controversy was not the fact that he was gay, but the need to guard this secret to protect his image as a successful minister and musician. Like Cleveland, there are currently thousands of black LGBT persons who are allowed to function within the confines of the black church as long as they keep silent. They can be out in black gay communities, but must remain closeted in the church. If they make the decision to come out of the closet, they are asked to leave the church, even though queerness abounds and thrives within a black church aesthetics of excess. The ritual of the black church worship service allows for camp performance, or

representational excess. The performance of camp provides a space for black gay men to express their queerness, but it also provides a space for straight black males to perform their own feminized masculinity. Heterosexual black males partake in the performance of queerness when they are “touched” by the Holy Spirit. Allowing heterosexual black males to partake in this performance stretches the boundaries of black church hegemonic masculinity. The excess of camp that is part of a black church service allows one to push the boundaries of the masculinity of heterosexual black men. In this sense, heterosexual black men in the church “queer” their masculinity in the rituals of the black church. The camp performance of the spirit allows for a transgressive “sissification” of church aesthetics thereby allowing black heterosexual men to express a queer masculinity. An exorcism of the heteronormative body politic of the black church is needed in order to release black LGBT persons from the sexual oppression and turmoil of the black church.

5. Preachers and Punks, Sissies and Saints: Constructions of Black Religious Masculinity in the Climactic Moment of Black Worship

Johari Jabir (University of California, Santa Barbara)

The two most controversial examples of black religious masculinity are the male preacher and the male musician. In the context of black worship, these two masculinities cooperate and collaborate to construct each other’s masculinity through two of the most essential material aspects of black worship – the pulpit and the Hammond B3 organ. An old familiar saying – “singing is alright, but it takes the word of God” – is not merely a theological statement on behalf of the so-called “word” itself; it also privileges the rhetorical “performance” of the word by the preacher over and above the performance of the musician. Singing, or music, is not able to heal, deliver, or ultimately save. The word re-centers the preacher himself as a key and necessary masculine figure in worship. This privileging of “the word” is somewhat ironic given the music aspect of the sermonic climax, which relies on the expertise of the church musician, specifically the organist. In terms of performance, the preacher resists the artistic sensibilities of his own musicality because he fears that which he has constructed as the feminized “other” – the musician. The musician also falls prey to this limited notion of identity and is a co-conspirator in this construction. The musician resists the reality that his music does indeed communicate something that is not less powerful or less important than the “preached” word. The communication between the two is simultaneously cooperative, collaborative, and contesting. Both cooperate to produce the moment of ritual – the sermonic climax. Both collaborate in the production of the other’s masculinity. And, at times, both contest the other’s masculinity in ways that find them disagreeing, not about the goodness of God but about the meaning of what it means to be a man.

In the culture of black religion, race is not the only topic of interrogation; class, sexuality, and certainly gender are also being pursued in the dramatic performance of black worship. The preacher certainly fears being upstaged, feminized, and even “less manly.” But the preacher’s preoccupation with what he identifies as the homosexual male church musician is in part a fear of feminization and penetration. In addition, the audience, the congregation, or the spectator needs attention here: What does this performance mean for those of who “watch” the climax between these two masculinities? The performative aspects of music and preaching are nothing without those who

contribute by watching, and certainly in the climactic moment, by engaging. What do “we” gain, not only from the climactic moment of ecstasy, but also from the masculine aesthetics being represented by the preacher and musician?

Response: *Ecstatic Aesthetics*

Maurice Wallace (Duke University)

E. Patrick Johnson suggested that when the spirit “touches” heterosexual male parishioners, it penetrates their burning bodies. In this sense, catching the spirit queers straight black masculinity. It subverts the patriarchal power of the black church and reinvents sex itself. The straight man gets caught up in the groaning and growling that no man should utter. It is the fear and desire for the powerless condition of male heterosexual identity that drives and frustrates the ecstatic. Few black male preachers seem willing to surrender all, to risk receptivity to the one power that will surpass God – the power of the erotic, a sexualized self-shattering that un-genders them. The charismatic preacher and the public intellectual may resist their receptivity, but their charisma depends upon their approaching the receptive position: the “natural expression of black religiosity.” To submit fully to the self-shattering in religion and/or sex is to sacrifice the aura of fucking or being fucked. This fear and desire is then located in the presumption that certain roles (such as the preacher, deacon, etc) are heterosexual; these are thought to be top men. Other roles (such as the choir director and organists) are presumed to be gay and presumably bottoms.

II.

UN-HOLY GHOSTS:

DECOLONIZING THE CHURCHES OF OUR YOUTH

Within the context of African American Queer liberation, the African American church has begun coming to expression in self-identified formations of religious bodies/communities of faith. Most, if not all, are in their infancy developmentally and are struggling for theological language that would embody both liberation and would begin to de-colonize the language of the “old” theological systems of thought. In addition to the challenges of language, this panel discussed the ways in which hierarchies of power are transported by the replication of former homo-negative black religious regimes. The following are representative quotes from their presentations.

Edwin Harper (Washington, D.C.)

“I identify myself as a Church of God in Christ elite due to my status as a choir director. I say elite because when I was a young fat sissy, you could not deny what happened when I directed the choir. Whereas others suffered through oppressive language, my status as the choir director made me exempt. Others became schizophrenic because they didn’t have the music to shield them from the attacks around them. While I acknowledge the bitterness and the toxicity, I am not angry at my former tradition. If it were not for that COGIC experience, I would not be the successful person that I am.

There was no room in my larger context and social location for a black boy in my reality of South Palo Alto, California. In spite of the ways they oppressed me and confused me, it was the COGIC church that gave me a certain confidence and allowed me to be the professional that I am.”

John Selders (*Amistad United Church of Christ, Hartford, CT*)

“I consider myself a Neo-Pentecostal Anglican Bishop who pastors a United Church of Christ in New England called, Amistad United Church of Christ. I am trying to do (church) in a different way but I am also called to establish a particular work. I am consciously mixing and converging the traditions that are dear to my heart. I don’t have all the answers, but here are some questions I would like to propose to those of us who endeavor to do this work: How do we articulate that we come from a specific place and a specific space in relationship to where we are now? Are we ready and willing to embrace the new, the unfamiliar, the not fully born? Are we willing to be changed in ways that we can’t anticipate? What are we really after? How do we resist the T. D. Jakes paradigm? What can we claim from the former tradition and what can be used for this new call toward ministry? Starting from scratch meant that I wasn’t obligated to bring old baggage into a new setting. At Amistad we create our own traditions. We embrace the new and reclaim aspects of our former traditions and take ownership for where they come from. But, our greatest challenge is authentic living – ethical decision making in our business dealings with one another. We must strive to set a better example for those who come after us.”

Wanda Floyd (*Imani Metropolitan Community Church, Durham, NC*)

“Imani Metropolitan Community Church is one of three African American MCC churches within the national denomination. It began with Bible studies and focus groups. The first service was held in the spring of 1991 and it drew over one hundred people. The issue of inclusive language is a challenge for Imani. For some in our congregation, the preoccupation with inclusive language tampers with their image of God. They prefer ‘including’ language as opposed to inclusive language. Therefore, we ‘include’ both he and she when it comes to naming the gender of God. In the beginning, I was very clear with people that I didn’t want Imani to be the church of their youth. We have a church that embraces traditional hymns so that we reclaim the former tradition but we make it our own. As it pertains to the topic of race, one of our biggest challenges has been to explain to potential members why we are not the typical version of a black church. Imani is not Pentecostal; therefore, it disappoints some people who visit Imani expecting to have a Pentecostal experience. As it pertains to gender, Imani defies the image of masculinity in the pulpit. With the exception of one, all of our ministers are female.”

Tonya Rawls (*Unity Fellowship Church, Charlotte, NC*)

“Being a Breaker in the Bible-Belt”

“Those of us who have established alternative safe houses of spirituality for black LGBT persons are reluctant to decolonize the churches of our youth because it forces us to go back to that place that was un-holy. The decolonizing process requires us to admit that the churches that we loved so much did not love us in our fullness. For me, the un-

holy place marks the time when God did not see me as daughter and Jesus loved me less because I loved women. This was a place that I did not want to return to. A place where my love for women was the one thing I needed to be delivered from. But this journey back caused me to remember my journey forward and my need to find a new colony of believers. I needed to get to know a new Jesus, not the passed-down Jesus.

The Unity Church was formed in 1982 when HIV hit the black community and it hit the black church in a particular way. The genesis of Unity Fellowship began when Bishop Carl Beam and a small band of prayer warriors provided refuge for those who had been rejected by their own churches. In those days AIDS was destroying the lives of black gay men who were denied burial rites at the churches where they had served as faithful, tithe-paying members, musicians, and choir directors. These were the same churches that exploited their gifts in order to build and grow their ministries. The willingness to become an alternative means of spiritual support for those who were dying from HIV/AIDS, as well as their partners and families, was the genesis of Unity Fellowship Church. In the midst of serving so many persons who had no place to go, Carl Beam saw the need to create an alternative space of spiritual refuge for African American LGBT persons.

Unity Fellowship of Charlotte, North Carolina was the first Unity church founded in the Bible belt. Being an out lesbian preacher in the Bible belt was the least of my worries: gender was far more problematic than my being a lesbian. I was preaching a progressive message to people who had never seen or heard a woman pastor and preacher. When Unity Fellowship Charlotte opened, members had to double dip so that they could bring their sexuality and spirituality into a safe space while maintaining ties with their traditional churches. I have to seek out places and sources of wisdom in order to continue the critical work that is often very complex. I believe we have to use the best of the tradition.”

Phyllis Pensee (*Pillar of Love Church, Chicago*)

“Putting Old Wine into New Wine Skins”

“I struggled with the description of the panel because I disagree with the premise that within many liberating black communities of faith, we are struggling with theological language and ideas. I am not certain that we are struggling with new language and/or theological thought. Moreover, I am not confident that our structures and theologies are consistent with the communities of faith that we confess to serve. More often than not, we find ourselves putting new wine into old wine skins. Many of us want to be Joyce Myers or T.D. Jakes but only gay. Despite the language of radical inclusivity, our theologies of a whosoever church, and the rhetoric of welcoming congregations, we are not creating new paradigms. I believe that some of our new language only serves to give permission for us to re-create the churches of our mothers and fathers.

The work of decolonizing the church is so challenging for several reasons. It is always important, for example, to ask who benefits from this religious system. We cannot deny that the hierarchical structure of the black church placed the power and authority of leadership in the hands of black men. Women were officially relegated to positions that were devoid of power. The work of decolonization is important because we are complacent with the old ways of doing church. I am particularly dismayed with black gay clergy who cannot conceive of God as anything other than male.

Oppression parallels and intersects with all other forms and its agents, which are usually exemplified and articulated through language. Our process for creating radically inclusive LGBT churches needs to include sorting out and sifting through the language of our inherited traditions. We need new ways of developing language and new thought that begins in the spirit and in the heart. While we must not throw the baby out with the bath water, we must only save the baby if the baby is worth saving. Therefore, we are left with the question: How are we recreating and developing new structures that are welcoming and inviting?"

Response: Lynice Pinkard (*First Congregational Church of Oakland, CA*)
"Eat the Fish and Throw Away the Bones"

"This panel has forced us to reckon with the need to overcome the unholy churches of our youth. Many of our panelists have warned us not to reify old structures and replicate the old paradigms. In these presentations, we see how oppression and domination are overarching structures that are not exclusively about sexuality. But we have to connect racism, classism, ageism, gender, and other forms of oppression. The panelists have given us a series of difficult but important questions for our work. For example: What does it mean if we buy into capitalistic market structures by overdoing and overspending – all in the name of religion? What does it matter if we continue to do this and we preach and teach a liberating theology? What does it mean to hold multiple positionalities in a multicultural context? How do we maintain a sense of historical continuity while being open to other ecclesial forms? What part of our tradition was life-giving? How are we freed from the un-holy ghosts in our lives? How do we see ourselves as the freeing ones? Once free, what does freedom look like and what do we want freedom for?"

Though we have embarked upon a new way of doing church, we are still caught up in the dialectical tension of the black church as a confidence builder and an institution that teaches us that we are the beloved. We must ask the deeper question as to how it can be helpful in the midst of being hurtful. Black people have always had to hold onto the dialectic of sadness and hope. How do we not become the oppressor that oppressed us? Let us come from a place of strength and freedom. The bureaucracy of the black church finds masses of people organized around something, yet it excludes LGBT persons not so much by its doctrines, but by a system of social control. We must learn to 'eat the fish and throw away the bones!'"

III.

DON'T LEAVE IT TO BEAVER:

GENDER CONSTRUCTION, MISOGYNY AND HOMO-NEGATIVITY IN THE CHURCH'S VERSION OF THE FAMILY

The relationship between the black church's traditional constructions of gender and gender roles and its homo-negativity, i.e., heterosexism and homophobia are derivative of sexism and misogyny. In addition, the relationship of traditional family ideology is directly related to homo-negativity. A critical and deep interrogation of family structures

and models in relation to the black church requires a simultaneous (re)examination of gender roles as prescribed by religion and society. The panelists discussed the danger in taking for granted more general and traditional notions of what it means to be "family" through the intersections of race, religion, class, gender, and sexuality; the following are a few representative samples of their observations and reflections.

1. My Christianity

Vickie Sides (Pillar of Love Church, Chicago)

The daily struggle with religion involves contextualizing God in ways that will allow a queer, anti-racist, pro-feminist, pro-choice, anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist woman to reconcile religion with various political positions. This struggle will mean overcoming the image of God as an angry parent who penalizes and punishes, with a God who does not punish, but is instead a God of love and mercy, and a God of grace. And the struggle warrants a critique of the metaphor of the church as the family of God, beginning with our perception of God as a male figure head and the church as the bride of Christ. How does this paradigm shape the family constructed on gender, age, and patriarchy? The Christian metaphor of the "church family" conjures images of God as automatically male and the church who serves God passively as any good wife would do. The role of "First Lady" in the church, for example, the spouse of the pastor, places a heavy burden of expectation on that person which is often impossible to meet.

The black church has done little to challenge the oppression of black women. Black women's bodies are still perceived as needing to be controlled – from pulpits that use black women's bodies in the name of heterosexism to the silence around female teenage sexuality and domestic violence. Learning to think of women as whole people and not simply in terms of their separate body parts that serve the utility of someone else can challenge the social norms of the family. In terms of family values, Black LGBT persons, in the desire to be seen as legitimate, have adopted the rhetoric of the right. In our longing to be perceived as normal and/or moral, we tend to apologize for being gay and miss the issues that really need to be addressed. It is immoral to live in the richest country in the world and allow people to go hungry. It is immoral to send persons who are poor to fight in other countries. We have to critique that which gets marketed as moral.

2. No Longer Strangers

Michael Brown (Emory University)

In the Letter to the Ephesians (2:19), Paul seeks to clarify the issue of including Gentiles by using political and social language in referring to the community: "You are no longer strangers but are co-citizens with the saints, members in the household of God." The term "Gentile" here suggests a very loose definition of non-Jews. Does this mean any person who is not a Jew? According to Paul's use of the phrase we can easily gloss over the diversity of the community and its different cultural backgrounds. What's needed is an adequate doctrine of diversity. We can't afford to embrace the evangelical interpretation of scripture that suggests that God provides clear and unambiguous revelation to human beings. Interpreting scripture in this way entails defending and

ignoring scriptures such as this one. If we embrace the notion that God gives ambiguous revelation, this places us in a better position to practice liberating interpretations of scripture. Part of the value of scripture is to force us to wrestle with God's revelation in spite of what the authors wrote.

3. No Atheist in the Foxhole: Church, State, and Queer Family Values

Sharon Holland (University of Illinois Chicago)

Cultural studies and queer critics have long exposed the myth of civil society and democratic pluralism. Yet, something draws queer bodies to participate in a structure that we know is a national fantasy. Whereas separation of church and state was once relegated to the "pledge of allegiance," now we see a plethora of faith-based initiatives, a fight to display the Ten Commandments on courthouse steps, and in the name of patriotism we are admonished to offer daily prayers for the troops. In this instance, queer scholars have failed to address religious fictions in our lives. We need a co-articulation of race, nation, and religion as well as the construction of identity, difference and hierarchy. In addition, the religious focus on the human has dismissed the notion that there are other beings on this planet besides human ones. A politic that does not focus exclusively on the human as an individual would challenge our ideas of human progress. Focusing on the human condition in terms of the value it holds for the individual along with our reflections on ourselves are shortsighted and detrimental to a truly radical politic of the human family.

4. [Ballroom Culture and Church]

Marlon Bailey (The University of California, Berkeley)

Ballroom culture (more popularly known as house culture) is a national Black/Latina/Latino phenomenon where gender, kinship and community coalesce into one world. The focus of the phenomenon lies on ballroom events and houses, which are the anchoring structure that mounts these activities. Ballroom culture is based on an egalitarian system that offers more selections of gender identity and performance than the larger societal system. Houses are led by designated mothers and fathers, regardless of age and/or gender, and they provide alternative support denied by blood lines. Balls, combined with the social relations outside of them, taken together make up "ballroom." Ballroom culture provides a location to consider the HIV/AIDS crisis within the larger context of the African Diaspora and how the epidemic participates in a larger discourse of colonial relations from which people of African descent suffer in multiple ways. Sexual abstinence and disciplining campaigns deflects attention away from the social economic causes of HIV/AIDS. In the United States, ballroom members who are pushed out of their black communities of belonging are a specific kind of social factor that results in forced dispersal. These social aspects highlight the intersections between queerness, blackness, and HIV/AIDS as black queers who are already racially and sexually marginalized face triple marginalization. Ballroom communities alter the dominate conditions of its members. HIV prevention is more about the spiritual, psychic, economic, and social conditions in which sexual practices emerge. These aspects are shaped by and through the institutions of black belonging in which we interact, such as the church. Ballroom undertakes the labor of love and creates a viable institution for survival.

5. The Church's Version of the Family: The Pastor as Alpha Male and Idealized Husband

Da Vita Carter-McAllister (The Fund for Theological Education)

The black church has two family models: the western myth that assumes that there is one male and female and their natural offspring, or the romantic ideal. In this model, maleness is tied to the ability to be provider and protector. The female is the spiritual center and nurturer in the family – the one able to provide spirituality and development. Children are submissive and passive and obedient in this version of the family. The second model, the congregational family, functions in the church even when there are husbands at home. In this model, the pastor serves as surrogate model to the entire church, he controls the finances, and he performs as physical protector through his influence over a few men, and he assumes the spiritual role of center. It is his co-opting of this spiritual role that allows him to facilitate this role. The women in the church are his bride.

The problem with the idealized nuclear family is its lack of accounting for black cultural extended families and the adoption of non-biological children and its silence on the inherent desire of both genders to nurture and be nurtured. Likewise in the congregational family (patterned after Ephesians 5:53), the alpha male is the pastor/husband to whom wives must submit as the church submits to Christ. Males must identify with God as father figure who is all-knowing, all-powerful, angry, and needs to control all other members in the family. When queers infiltrate the so-called church family, they disrupt the Victorian family model, which always requires disciplining and correction. Female pastors disrupt this model of correction as they cannot be the ideal husbands for other husbands even though she assumes the role of dominant male. This reconfiguration not only pits women against women, but it also undermines the full exploration of male and female roles in the context of congregations. Not only are queers disallowed, but heterosexual men are disallowed when they are not allowed to be “feminine.”

6. Holy Enema: Purging the Black Church of its Homophobia and Misogyny (Or, Black Levitical Priests and their Pimping of Black Queer People)

Irene Monroe (Harvard University)

In the black church, black straight men are elevated at the expense of women and black queers. If Rosa Parks had not sat down, King could not have gotten up. If Bayard Rustin had not sat down, King could not have gotten up. Queers and women have always been the strengths and weaknesses of black patriarchy. Today, the mega church is the new spiritual symbol in the black community. In what we might consider to be the black church of the new civil rights era, these mega churches are institutionalizing a black masculine heteronormative image. They promote heterosexuality as the norm through a biblical way of being. Historically, gender and sex have not been a part of our discourses on the black church, due largely to slavery and what blacks appropriated from the dominant culture in order to legitimate our humanity. Black bodies have never been in

control of themselves. In present day discourses, black bodies that were once usurped by whites are now ritualistically harnessed and policed by the black community. Today, the commercial images of blacks on billboards are nothing more than a present-day auction block. Physical strength, primitive images – these are all part of the pendulum of American iconography. We have to challenge the notion of the church family contained in the liturgy itself. We must challenge ourselves on how do we read scripture. We must again wrestle with scripture. We've always created a canon within a canon. As black queers, we've got to begin to "queer" scripture. Why should we throw out the curse of Ham and slavery, and uphold certain scriptures that dominant women and queers?

IV.

RECLAIMING STONEWALL:

ISSUES AT THE INTERSECTION OF RACE, CLASS, GENDER & SEXUALITY

By what means can sexual minorities of color set the agendas for our own communities rather than having whites determine the political and social agenda while circumscribing our participation in it? This would involve gathering persons of color who work in communities of color to address issues at the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality who are not necessarily funded by larger white LGBTQ organizations and are perhaps overlooked because they do not operate under the banner of the alphabet soup. This panel consisted of physical and mental health professionals, community leaders, and others with the aim of coalition-building between LGBTQ scholars and religious leaders, as well collaborative work among service providers who inevitably impact our lives. The panel explored the following questions: How can LGBTQ scholars/religious leaders articulate our vision to such professionals and galvanize support as we have with other issues in the past? What might LGBTQ scholars/religious leaders learn from the aforementioned health professionals and community leaders? The following offers representative quotes from the panelists.

Mekanni Themba (*The PRAXIS Project*)

“I want you to try and picture in your mind what liberation looks like and feels like to you. What happens when you walk down the street, what are schools like, what is family like, what does the sky look like, and what does liberation taste like? We often talk about civil rights but not liberation and freedom. Not mere acceptance or tolerance, but how we become free. The issue of queering liberation is extricably tied to de-linking sex from power, from patriarchy, from the inbred, thoroughly ingrained social perception of who's on top. If we imagine our world without that hanging over us, where people don't have to worry about categories, would we be referring to brothers who live on a continuum and wouldn't have to stake a claim? Stonewall is about rebellion, not accepting things the way they are. We need tools, and each of us is trying to have conversations on our own. We need to develop the tools that we share with one another. We have to remember the purpose of churches. When we talk about mega churches, churches reflect their economic history and conditions. They turn to them because they believe that like corporations, they can do it better. How do we interrogate that?”

Victor Ponds (*The MOCHA Collaborative*)

“Maybe I’m the only one who believes that the white gay community is incapable of supporting an environment where we help fight each other’s battles. I am sickened by the all too common space where non-whites are treated like exotic accessories, temporary distractions, or racialized sex objects. Or spaces where we’re expected to join the gay army to fight homophobia, while the army dissolves, leaving those of us of color standing alone to fight racism. Daily we must choose between accommodating our invisibility, and asserting our invisibility, fully aware there is always the risk of being scarred or being hurt beyond repair. But there is also a risk of being set free.

Truth be told, the civil rights movements, women’s movements, and gay movements, were never about freedom for all. Instead, these movements were self-serving strategies intended to recapture the privilege to acknowledge that they benefit from certain privileges. In other words, they chose to live in a world where they can deny their privilege and also protect it. The civil rights movement was and still is about heterosexual black men whose goal it was to make themselves equal to the status of white men. Women of color are a best an after thought.

The Stonewall revolt has been repeatedly bastardized, sanitized, and decolorized to tell a partial and self-serving story. The traditional description of the rainbow is that it is made up of seven not six colors: red, orange, yellow, blue, indigo, green, and violet. Actually, the rainbow consists of a whole continuum of colors from red to violet and even beyond the array of colors that I can see. Diversity, within a social and political context is not defined by me or people like me. We don’t control the mainstream gay press, and we are left to choose between patterns of assimilation or conscious deconstruction.

Reclaiming Stonewall is about setting the record straight. It was not about reclaiming exclusively a sexual freedom, or creating an abhorrent melting pot under the rubric of gay. I will not have my loyalty or my humanity put on probation by self-appointed gurus of this gay kingdom that expect me to surrender my racial identity and pride. Or worse, expect me to collude with their decision to segregate into gay ghettos where I become a tolerated guest. At least in the black community I can find refuge from the vicious racial barks of the sexually repressed. Reclaiming stonewall is about telling the story with our voice. No one should be expected to settle with only being an echo, and not the original source of the sound. Our concern should go beyond correcting caricatured accounts of our past. But from this point forward, we are witnesses, recorders, editors, regardless of our collective histories and herstories.”

Yvette Flunder (*Refuge Ministries*)

“How is it that we gather around the issues as Same-Gender-Loving people and we have such difficulty after we finish? When we finish, what will we do with what we have shared with each other? We are an emerging community absorbed with how to survive holocausts. Not all of the persons who have died from AIDS, substance abuse and other illnesses died from those causes; these were the effects of slow suicide. What will it take for us to move beyond the thousand little nothings and get one good something? We have such difficulty in coming together to create any one ‘something’ that will give us

political clout, economic clout, and the ability to speak truth to power in a way that deeply affects power. We need some higher calling that will bring us together. What is our cause? What is strong enough and powerful enough to pull us together and bring us together? Maybe we need to study another paradigm of leadership and fellowship. We don't want to lose ourselves in the larger mix. But we'll have to do this to get something done. We will have to translate what we do to the common brother and sister. We have to sincerely celebrate our prophetic call. I say that unapologetically. I was called out of eternity into time to do some specific work. Part of that work was to be a SLG woman. God does not use me in spite of who I am but because of who I am. This is not an easy task, but we are called to be a group of prophetic people. God chose to use us for God's glory and for the benefit of humanity.

I have a Stonewall. Mine is called Azusa Street. I want to reclaim Azusa as my Stonewall because it was about the coming together under the belief that God would be great in the midst of them. Women preaching, interracial preaching, black man blind in one eye, getting together in Los Angeles, California in a place that was a stable for horses talking about racial equality. It was stolen from me. I want to reclaim it. A real honest to goodness Pentecostal celebrates diversity. A real Pentecostal celebrates the awe and wonder and history of God."

Juan Reed (*St. Martin's Episcopal Church, Chicago*)

"Keith Boykin decided to visit the homophobic church of a pastor he interviewed. When he arrived at the church for Sunday worship he was shocked to see so many gay people who knew in the congregation and in positions of leadership. The African American church is the most homophobic religious space for black people while also being the most homo-tolerant institution in the African American community. Robert Franklin, in a report on a minister's conference, talks about the condemnation of certain behaviors while privately expressing toleration – he saw this as a strength. In spite of Black Christian homophobia, gay people are well represented in black churches – choir, pulpit, pews, everywhere. Homophobia could not go on without the participation of gay people. Such dishonesty could not go on without our participation. I'm not simply talking about sexuality but I'm talking about truth and credibility. Until our churches deal with this straight on, we will fail to be real sources of ethical and moral decision making for everybody. How do you stay so close to the center of the church and stay on the edges at the same time?

Welcoming gays and lesbians is not tolerating our presence. It's not welcoming us into a church that stays the same – where we're tolerated. It's about the embodied voice, not just charisma and ecstasy. There are two aspects we forget – voice and body. Once we start opening our mouth, we make room for everybody. If we don't do this, we're wasting our time. We have to use the body for justice during the week. Make a conscious commitment to walking what we believe. We have to name people when we say come as you are. We have to create a language and space."

Toni Dunbar (*Refuge Ministries*)

"I am very concerned with praxis. There is that which we learn, that which we know, and that which we do. In the latter, we influence the doing of others. This is what maintains or changes the status quo. Frankly, my work is barely touched by queer

activism – except in the cases where there is extreme injustice suffered by some queer person in the compression of the juvenile system. While the closet is not a good place for anyone, it is by far the safest place for queer children in the justice system. The result of overzealous queer activists entering the prison system is that youth pay with their bodies for the activist's zeal. The adolescent terror of being different is so deep that I have seen boys and thugs shattered after being raped and infected with HIV while serving their sentence in the juvenile detention system. The church, as represented by conservative Christians and Muslims who make the majority of prison volunteers, do more damage than good.

I do not partner with white queer agencies because I have not found that they understand the unique tensions. Nor has my witness been credible. Therefore, I do not entertain anything that would be detrimental to the children. Rather than mourn, we have developed a pastoral, cultural, and political model, one that is a hybrid of faith, community based, secular based, one that is gorilla and ambassadorial. It's built on militancy and moderation. It is also transferable. Here are some practical strategies: when forming or contemplating partnerships, insist upon cultural competency for those who don't have it; insist upon self-design and self-direction for those who do possess cultural competency; assume a policy-influence, a policy-advisor, and/or policy-directed role; use and/or usurp the oppressor's own tools; in an untenable or un-winnable battle, live to fight another day.”

Response: Maurice Charles (*University of Chicago*)

“I have been reminded of the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu: ‘Some of the best theologies have come not from the undisturbed peace of a study, or speculations of a university seminar, but in the heat of battle.’ Western theology has wanted to lay claim to universality that it too easily called its own. Christians have thought that the answers they possessed were the answers to questions that nobody in different situations was asking. All of our speakers have taken the risk of making themselves available to the questions that arise out of the crucible of their experience. The ‘everyday’ place sums up these presentations, the everyday place from which the authentic theological questions must arrive and ultimately must return. It is the place from which particular voices arise to challenge the voices of normative theologies. The cry for daily bread is not simply a pious metaphor, it is the place where reclaiming Stonewall has little to do with picking the right t-shirt to wear to the pride parade. But it has more to do with maintaining the will to live when the bricks smash a young man's car window. It means maintaining the will to keep studying when he has to fight his way to the library, back from the library, and to the library again. It means finishing high school, something many of us take for granted. He has to deal with the violence of his existence everyday. It is a place of urgency. The everyday is that place where in the midst of that racial and economically mixed crowd in 1969 where the homeless youth, the drag queens, and lesbians decided to resist the banality of evil. When someone finds their voice in that place, their words may prove more disruptive than our plans for liberation. David Tracy says of the poor, ‘their words may seem uncivil by some tired standards of what is academic discourse, but they must be heard, and preferably heard first.’ If we are willing to be vulnerable, to listen to the voices of those that arise from the everyday voices of oppression, we risk encountering our own liberation.”



The mission of PSR's Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry (CLGS) is to advance the well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons and to transform faith communities and the wider society by taking a leading role in shaping a new public discourse on religion and sexuality through education, research, community building and advocacy.

The CLGS African American Roundtable (AART) brings together African American gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender scholars, activists and religious leaders in order to explore issues at the intersection of race, sexuality, gender, and religion and to transform African American communities around these issues.

For more information about CLGS and the Racial/Ethnic Roundtable Project, visit the Center's website: www.clgs.org.