



Abyssinian Baptist Church, 1900s. Schomburg Collection.

harlem is...

the GOSPEL tradition

Tracing the journeys of four African-American churches that were at the forefront of the migration to Harlem

CELEBRATING
THE RICH
TRADITION OF
HARLEM'S
FAITH-BASED
INSTITUTIONS

Harlem is not a location. It cannot be described geographically. Harlem is a happening! It has been popularly described as the home of "happy feet." Indeed, happy feet have been manifested on the dance floor of the Savoy, the ballroom of the Renaissance and the beat from the juke boxes of the Golden Gate, the Red Rooster, Count Basie's and Jock's. But the happy feet have a more significant sound as the tired bodies but spiritual souls tap their feet to the tune of the spirituals; excited bodies that "shout" to the powerful beat of the charismatic service and bodies that move to the rhythm of the mournful melodies that are reminiscent of Harlem's oppression by the words of the hymn "There is a Balm in the Gilead" or the blues tune "Why Are You Doing This To Me?" Black people moved and created Harlem before the institutional churches followed them to the Mecca of soul.

Abyssinian Baptist Church led the march from 55th Street to 138th Street. St. James Presbyterian Church followed on its heels from 55th Street to 141st Street and it wasn't long before the Christian soldiers inhabited the old Jewish synagogues and the streets of Harlem were dotted with church after church after church. They

were all there, including black Jews and Rabbi Matthew Wentworth, Ethiopian/elves, Marcus Garvey and the African Orthodox Church. Mainline denominations and charismatic holy-spirit-emphasized storefronts. But the message from all of them was "Walk Together, Children, Don't You Get Weary." Father Divine brought the soup kitchens and Daddy Grace brought jazz orchestras into the sanctuary. But the basic message was "Hold on, hold on, there'll be a great camp meeting in the Promised Land."

As the years passed, and the Depression sank its piercing sword into the life of Harlem's residents, the phoenix of the social gospel began to rise and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Jim Robinson, John Johnson and Eugene Adair began to shift the emphasis from heaven to the streets. Programs dealing with social ills began to blossom. And by the time I arrived, that was the essential message.

The label that the ghetto community had placed upon its residents was not valid or true and some of our churches began to think and teach about the transformation of soul and community. The paralyzing, penetrating bane of poverty had to be dealt with. The contemporary crucifixion taking place in the classrooms of the schools of the

community had to be eradicated and faith had to be understood and demonstrated as the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen. So, I started with the clinic to detoxify drug addicts, rent strikes to criminalize delinquent landlords, freedom schools to promote relevant education and eventually street academies and Harlem Prep.

Now the churches need a new paradigm. A paradigm that will re-engineer the oppressive bureaucracy that continues to destroy the energy, spirit and soul of too many of Harlem's current people. This paradigm has got to begin with an enthusiastic intention on the part of the spiritual community to create a source that will speak to the inner spirit of the depressed being that will begin to stir up within that soul an awareness of its relationship to the creative energy and the continuing resources of energy to the individual. The continuing design of the paradigm must help that invigorated new being to begin to understand and transmit this new found awareness to control and manage the resources available from the bureaucracies that will enable each component of the human community, parent and child, to transform those resources in a constructive way for their own well being. Ezekiel's bones must come together again.

—The Reverend Dr. Eugene S. Callender, St. James Presbyterian Church

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