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Say Amen, Somebody

African-American ministers struggle to make their voices heard in America's whitest city.

BY AARON MESH



SHOW SOME LOVE: For Dr. W.G. Hardy's 52nd birthday, Highland Christian Center hosted a three-hour "love concert," complete with a 41-person choir, a special offering, and birthday cake for the approximately 300 people in attendance.

IMAGE: Vivian Johnson (all)

The national spotlight has rarely glared so brightly on the pulpits of America's estimated 75,000 African-American churches as it did Sunday morning, March 23. It was Easter Sunday, but the national media dedicated that Sunday to coverage of how those churches would react to one man, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright Jr.

On the cable news networks, incendiary excerpts from the 2001 and 2003 sermons of Sen. Barack Obama's former pastor were airing more regularly than Pennsylvania poll numbers: *God damn America! God damn America! God damn America!* Six days earlier, Obama himself had delivered a historic speech in Philadelphia, in which the Democratic presidential front-runner would declare of Wright, "I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community."

Meanwhile in Portland, 2,000 miles away from Obama's Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, senior pastor W.G. Hardy stood in a royal-blue frock at the wooden dais of his purple-carpeted sanctuary at Highland Christian Center, which also is part of the United Church of Christ. Three cameramen beamed his image to a jumbo screen behind him and

five other televisions in the balconies.

When the 52-year-old Hardy (pictured on the cover) rises each week to speak in the sanctuary of the United Church of Christ outpost on Northeast 76th Avenue and Glisan Street, he can usually count on rapt attention from most in the congregation, about three-quarters of whom are African-Americans. On Easter morning, he had an extra audience: Two Oregon state senators—Avel Gordly and Ben Westlund—were seated in the pews, along with U.S. Senate contender Steve Novick and Portland City Council candidates Nick Fish and John Branam.

Hardy offered them all a blunt message.

"All of us are messed up," he exhorted the congregants. "Show us your wounds! I heard Obama say, 'That's my pastor, I'm going to show you my wounds. I can't deny him no more than I can deny my white grandmother. I can't help it, I can't change it...that's my wound, you're going to have to live with it, and I'm going to survive it and get over it.'"

At least half of the congregants stood and cheered—just as they had moments earlier when Hardy hypothesized about the other "wounds" in the church.

"My best friend got shot and died in my arms—I want to show you my wounds," he said, gyrating his arms to demonstrate figurative examples of suffering. "I used to be a pimp—let me show you my wounds. I used to be a streetwalker—let me show you my wounds. I used to be arrogant, self-centered, conceited, thought I was all that—let me show you my wounds. I survived my wounds; I survived my afflictions!"

If you're white and living in Portland—and chances are, if you're living in Portland, you are white, along with 78 percent of the city's population—this rhetoric, freighting a larger social and political struggle on top of the usual Christian mix of Biblical mores and uplift, may sound odd coming from a church leader.

If you're African-American, however, and you grew up watching ministers like Martin Luther King Jr. or the Rev. Jesse Jackson, the blend of politics and religion is a given—and so is the sense of injury.

"Anyone who knows a tad bit about African-American history knows what kind of role the church plays in African-American life," said Charles McGee, co-founder of the Black Parent Initiative, which seeks to organize churches for social activism. "The church is more than just a spiritual vehicle. The church has been the singular place for black people to express themselves. The church was the place where they [could] go to get away from a week of disappointment—a place where they could yell."

In fact, Hardy—like Portland ministers such as Rev. Robert L. Ned, pastor of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church—believes the uproar over Wright's statements is downright disingenuous. "What we saw with Jeremiah Wright, it's always existed in the church," Hardy says. "As long as [pastors] were a gatekeeper...domesticating the African-American slave,

using religion for moral consciousness...it was a 'good thing.' When they start to challenge the system, at those times they're speaking truth to power, and all of a sudden the powers that be want a separation of church and state.

"Tactics haven't changed. They assassinated Martin Luther King—a religious leader who was raising up a generation of political activists. They assassinated him with a bullet, and they're attempting to assassinate Jeremiah Wright with the media, because he's raising up a new generation of political leaders."

But while African-American ministers in Portland rise to defend Wright's statements as both theologically accurate and needed tonics to America's history of racial oppression, their unanimity disguises a much more local question they say confronts their churches now: How do they make their voices heard in America's whitest city?

Because if Hardy is correct that Wright is raising a new generation of African-American political leaders in Chicago, that phenomenon isn't apparent here heading into Oregon's May 20 primary.

If there was a zenith of African-American political power—or at least visibility—in Oregon, it came in 1984, when Margaret Carter became the first African-American woman elected to the state Legislature and Dick Bogle was elected as the second consecutive African-American to hold a Portland City Council seat.

But in Portland, the city with Oregon's largest African-American population, no African-American candidate is expected to win a seat on the Council, which has been all white since 1992. And statewide, there are still but three African-American lawmakers in the 90-member state Legislature.

In some ways that's not surprising. After all, Portland has the largest percentage of white residents of any U.S. city larger than 450,000 people. And its African-American population is just 6.6 percent. The city has elected only two African-American commissioners in its 157-year history.

And the Oregon Constitution barred blacks from residency until 1926, continuing to contain fragments of racially exclusionary language until state voters struck that language by passing a 2002 ballot measure.

Meanwhile, gentrification has transformed Portland's predominantly African-American neighborhoods of North and Northeast, forcing many longtime residents to find cheaper housing on the outskirts of Portland and in Beaverton, Gresham and Troutdale. But white families have, by and large, rejected the public schools in those neighborhoods. Jefferson High, once one of the city's crown jewels, is now Oregon's only majority African-American high school, making it both a source of pride and a symbol of Portland's institutional racism.

That all adds up, in some eyes, to a crossroads of leadership.

For more than 50 years, the one constant voice of advocacy for Portland's African-American communities has been the Albina Ministerial Alliance. The alliance is a coalition of about 125 pastors, led by a core group averaging 15 highly active clergy members. In recent years, the Alliance has lobbied the City of Portland on such issues as the creation of Rosa Parks Boulevard and increased oversight of the police. In a city with few African-American candidates who can muster the contributions needed to make a serious run for public office, Alliance pastors like Hardy, Ned and Dr. T. Allen Bethel of Maranatha Church of God serve as links between public bodies and their political constituencies.

The Alliance's push for social justice has earned Carter's respect. "Our ministers step up to the plate in terms of leadership, even though some of them have been greatly maligned," the Portland Democrat says. "The Albina Ministerial Alliance went to our sons and said, 'This killing each other has got to stop.' That's bold. They don't just take on the easy things. They take on the hard things."

Alliance pastors urge their congregations to vote, they speak at City Hall and they raise community concerns to the media. Their tone—not outraged but impassioned and resolutely encouraging—rarely calls to mind America's sound-bite glimpse of Jeremiah Wright. But their methods of using their pulpits as platforms for political activism calls to mind the motto—"Unashamedly Black and Unapologetically Christian"—Wright practiced for three decades at Trinity United Church of Christ.

"You've got to really be careful nowadays with how you package things," Ned says. "It's the same message" as Wright's, he adds, "but a softer tone." But at least one member of the Alliance—Hardy, who was once among the most outspoken—has come to believe the traditional political path of trying to help your community by serving as a highly visible spokesman (and getting white politicians to pay homage) has delivered mixed results.

And the two-year-old Black Parent Initiative is offering churches a new route, abandoning traditional politics to build what it hopes is a grassroots movement that can help congregations publicly advocate for themselves, instead of depending on

their pastors. The leaders of the group say they have deliberately modeled their faith-based-organizing blueprint on another Chicagoan—not Wright but Obama, who spent three years in the 1980s coordinating congregations to push neighborhood improvements on the South Side.

The goals Portland's African-American church leaders are trying to reach—better schools, better jobs and more affordable housing for their parishioners—are the same. It's the different methods, as expressed by the older tried-and-true approaches or the newer organizers, that will determine if Portland's African-American churches can use their influence on city politics to heal the wounds of their congregations.

The Old Guard

On Sunday, March 30, Rev. Ned—a thick-set 55-year-old man with a neatly trimmed Van Dyke—told the 50 or so congregants of Bethel AME Church at Northeast 8th Avenue and Jarrett Street that he had a special visitor to introduce. That guest was Fish, a white man who's running a third time for Portland City Council.

Asked to say a few words, Fish remarked from his second-row pew: "This is not the time for a political speech, but I ask that you pray for our city and pray for me on my journey. As a Christian, I'm honored to be here."

The following Sunday, April 6, Ned again paused from welcoming guests to make a quick plug for City Council candidate Harold Williams Two ("we're so very proud of Two") and offer some impromptu commentary.

"Why are all these people seeking political office passing through?" Ned asked his congregation. "If you want to be anything in the city, you must go through Bethel."

During an interview in his office, Ned—an executive board member of the Albina Ministerial Alliance since 2001—says the support of his church's 250 members is not a must for a successful candidate. "We're not all that," he says. "But I can say it would be to their advantage to come here, because we are so politically connected. If we put our heads together, we can push that particular candidate."

The church's members support this approach. "I think there is power in religion," says Bobbie Smith. "We have a powerful voice." (She also expresses solidarity with Wright, who she says "touched on issues that most people are afraid to tackle. He told it like it is.")

Bethel AME has been doing it this way for a long time.

The sanctuary's peaked stained-glass windows chronicle the history of one of Portland's oldest African-American churches—founded in 1889, it moved to its current location in 1959.

It comprises an aging congregation. And that congregation is shrinking: In the 1970s, Bethel AME's membership peaked at 550. It is now down to 250.

Ned says the historically African-American neighborhoods in North and Northeast Portland have grown cleaner and safer. But he has also watched his parishioners shut out of those gains—often forced to move east when their property values increased and they could not afford to pay the correspondingly higher property taxes. About 15 percent of his congregants—many of them elderly—now commute to the inner Northeast Portland church from Beaverton. "In seven years, I've seen 10 houses sold by blacks, people done a little work on them and sell them again," he says. "Just turning them over." He sometimes feels the "flipping" is part of a conspiracy to drive African-Americans from the Alberta and Killingsworth neighborhoods. "My human mind tells me that it's by design," Ned says. "I know it's not, but it feels that way."

When Ned preaches, many of his words are dedicated to reinforcing what group identification remains. "The membership in the African-American church here in Portland has lost the fragrance of the struggle to get here," he says. "They have lost that sense of identity."

Ned urges his congregation toward self-sufficiency. The church has formed a nonprofit called the Bethel Economic Development Committee, which bought property across the street from the church, and is planning to build an apartment complex for seniors and low-income families. "We're not trying," he says. "We're going to do it. We're moving, man. We're moving."

The Megachurch

On any given Sunday morning, you can find between 600 and 800 people at W.G. Hardy's Highland Christian Center.

In 2000, Highland United Church of Christ outgrew its traditional, steeple-topped building on Northeast 9th Avenue and moved into a converted theater at Northeast Alberta Street and 18th Avenue..

And in 2006, as its displaced congregation continued to drift east, the church erected a \$6 million brick campus on credit on Northeast 76th Avenue. That same year, Hardy left the job he'd held since 1986 as an instructor specializing in apprenticeship training for light-rail and ticket-vending mechanics at TriMet to minister full time.

Highland's services are a combination of traditional African-American worship with the trappings of a modern evangelical megachurch (though nowhere near as large a suburban megachurch as Beaverton Foursquare Church, which can draw as many as 6,000 people). Women cool themselves with fans featuring the portrait of a young Martin Luther King Jr., available for free in buckets in the vestibule that's next to the Holy Grounds coffee stand, where a 16-ounce latte goes for \$3.25. Praise-and-worship is led by a four-piece band. DVDs of holiday services are available for \$10 to \$15 in the lobby.

Highland members are proud of their church's prominent position. "I think we should play somewhat of a role" in city politics, says Lakeeshia Lowery, as she walks her son to a minivan. "I definitely do."

Hardy's sermons are exuberant, downright joyful affairs, in which he mixes urban argot—"Can I keep it real?" he often asks—with conservative messages out of place in much of liberal Portland because they're usually associated with the religious right.

In interviews, he summarizes these stances: "The African-American male is an endangered species: You have more in prison than you do in college"; he opposes domestic partnerships for gays, and says "the vast majority of abortions are a matter of convenience and race control—genocide."

Yet as bold as Hardy is from the pulpit, and as willing as he is to include politicians at Highland services (he sends out invitations to public officials every Black History Month), he is reluctant to speak as a public voice for the African-American community. He says he is haunted by memories of the last time he took his message outside Highland's doors.

That was in 2003, in the uproar following a white Portland police officer's fatal shooting of a 25-year-old African-American woman, Kendra James. As the Albina Ministerial Alliance led marches and forums, Hardy was among the loudest voices demanding reforms of the Portland Police Bureau's disciplinary review process.

And then, on the morning of Sept. 16, 2003, Hardy woke up to a *Portland Tribune* story reporting how he had been indicted he previous April on charges of felony fourth-degree assault and misdemeanor first-degree mistreatment involving a minor, and had two misdemeanor convictions in 1995 on domestic violence for harassing and assaulting his ex-wife.

Hardy says he chose not to respond to the charges publicly to protect his children: "It's like letting yourself get beat up, otherwise they're going to hurt your family." (Multnomah County Court records show that both 2003 charges were dismissed, though Hardy later pleaded guilty to an October 2003 charge of misdemeanor harassment. Also, he has since remarried.)

"The same thing, I think, happened there that happened with Barack Obama," he says. "They started counterattacking the credibility of the people who were giving voice to the issues. If you take out the kingpin, generally there's just a void."

Hardy says he and other African-American ministers have grown savvier about their political advocacy by "just working underground."

"Because once you fly above the radar screen," says Hardy, "that's the one they're gonna shoot."

Hardy says ministers are stealing pages from other, successful ethnic playbooks that rely less on public faces and more on private organizing. "The African-American community is learning to model itself after the Asian community and the Ukrainian community," he says.

Hardy points to the opening in February of the Avel Gordly Center for Healing—a downtown mental health clinic that serves African-Americans—as an example of the new model. The African-American Mental Health Commission "had to work underground for six years" to build partnerships between churches and Oregon Health & Science University. By the moment the clinic, named for an African-American state senator, was ready to open, Hardy says, "there wasn't enough time for

opposition.”

He adds that African-Americans still need “a 25 year-plan” to achieve equality in education, jobs and housing.

Is such a blueprint in the works? “If it were, I wouldn’t tell you,” he says, “because somebody would try and sabotage it. You get five black people in a room and somebody walks by...” He trails off with a knowing look.

The Newest Organizers

Charles McGee is also convinced that African-American churches need to build up reserves of political capital.

He just doesn’t think the ministers should be doing it.

“They did fantastic work,” McGee says. “They did work that was tremendous for that time and that hour. [But] it’s really clear to me that a new day has come.”

McGee is no stranger to challenging older men. He is 22 years old. At 19, he ran for a seat on the Portland School Board and placed third out of seven candidates with 4,482 votes. After losing that race, McGee re-evaluated his political approach.

“We’re having all these conversations about helping African-American children,” he recalls of the campaign, “and I look around the room and don’t see many African-American people.”

So McGee founded the Black Parent Initiative, a Portland advocacy group designed to “inspire, empower and mobilize black parents in hopes of closing the educational achievement gap.”

BPI was initially funded by a \$100,000 grant from the City of Portland’s general fund and an additional \$50,000 grant from Portland Public Schools. It operates out of a vinyl-sided house turned makeshift office on Northeast Dekum Street. But its organizational base is African-American churches.

BPI has begun recruiting churches to join—encouraging members of the congregations to attend leadership-training seminars in which they are instructed how to advocate at schools, in public meetings and in the media.

Hardy, while admiring BPI’s aims, is skeptical of McGee’s post-pastor model. “I think most pastors do encourage their congregations to become active in schools [and] the political arena...I’d love to see it move beyond [ministers]; I don’t think it ever will.”

So far, 11 churches have agreed to join BPI. Most are small: places like the Church of the True Vine, with 80 members, and True Believers Christian Center, with 60 members. The ministers at these churches are a little younger—True Vine pastor Rev. Dwight Minnieweather is 47, and True Believers pastor Rev. Andre Young is 37—and they are less interested than previous generations in speaking on behalf of their congregations.

“There is a social place in society for the church,” says Minnieweather, sitting at the BPI conference table, where BPI lead organizer Ron Williams has invited him for an interview with *WW* before his Sunday, April 6, worship service.

Minnieweather is clearly not accustomed to talking to reporters: He seems shy, and he often glances down at a sheet of talking points he’s prepared for the interview. “I need to take my congregation from the smaller church world to the larger world.”

McGee says the tentative steps taken by Young and Minnieweather will reap rewards by empowering their congregations to move beyond waiting for a commanding pastor to lead them on each and every political question. And as the nation debates Jeremiah Wright’s legacy, McGee is fashioning BPI in the mold of Barack Obama’s early church-organizing efforts in Chicago.

“At the end of the day,” McGee says, “we will have to deliver for our families and our children. The singular leadership model is losing traction. That leader, and we’ve seen it nationally, can and will be torn down. We will not find another Martin. We will not find another Malcolm. People will have to do it for themselves.”

Between the 2000 and 2006 census, the African-American population of Portland remained steady. African-American numbers in Gresham increased from 1.9 percent to 3.1 percent. The African-American population in Hillsboro rose from 1.2

percent to 2.2 percent.

The last major protest led by the Albina Ministerial Alliance was in 2003 after the fatal police shooting of Kendra James. The Alliance issued a report containing 45 recommendations for changes in police procedure. Twenty of those recommendations have been adopted.

"The black churches have not been engaged deep enough," says Fred Stewart, a Realtor running for City Council. "They're going to get pissed off at me for saying that, but it's the truth.... Have they done anywhere near as much to get families in [affordable] homes as I have?"

Last year, Charles McGee's 27-year-old sister, Charlene McGee, became president of the Portland branch of the NAACP—making her the youngest NAACP branch president in the nation.

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