

James H. Buford Column

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For centuries, the Black Church has always been the lifeblood of the African American community. It has always been the most effective way to spread the word. Pastors have always been viewed by their congregations as wise sages who speak God's word to the masses. From social, economic to political the church has always had a profound effect on the African American community. Traditionally there has also been an air of social justice inclusive to the Black Church agenda.

From slavery to the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Church has always taken a stand against social inequality. Today, this has not been the case as much as it had been in the past. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, known as the architect of the Civil Rights Movement, was a pastor before he became a civil rights leader. Perhaps it is because of the high-price he paid, that few pastors today try to walk in his footsteps. However, there are few pastors who have led the fight against racial profiling, employee discrimination, equal education and fair housing.

Another aspect of the growing social justice movement has been the proliferation of mega-churches led by Bishop T.D. Jakes, Pastor Creflo A. Dollar and Bishop Eddie Long. These pastors lead churches with memberships surpassing 10,000 each, host conferences of 100,000 and have worldwide television ministries. The rapid growth of these mega-churches, have been commendable on one end because they bring multitudes of African Americans together for a positive goal. Despite this, the mega-churches have been criticized for having a lack of social activism within their ranks. One would think with their influence numbering into the millions, that it would be ideal for their pastors to use their pulpits as a platform for social justice. What could happen if these pastors joined together to fight against employee discrimination or police brutality? I think our progress on these issues would be outstanding.

Recently, Revs. Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson and Joseph Lowery III instituted National Dialogue and Revival for Social Justice the Black Church conferences in Dallas and Indianapolis to encourage African American pastors to embrace social justice causes for their communities. I believe that this dialogue is crucial to empowering the African American community to fight for equality. It is not enough to preach a feel good sermon to the masses and then send them home to deal with racism, poverty and discrimination on their own. The time has come once again for the African American church to step up to the challenge of ministering to not only to a person's spiritual needs, but also to their social, economic and physical needs. In this way, we will make great strides towards improving conditions that have existed in the African American communities for decades.

As some of us may already know, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King had never pastored a mega church. Yet, he made a mega difference not only to his own community but to the world. I challenge not only the pastors of the mega churches, but all pastors to make a stand and advocate for the rights of their congregations. It is only in this way that we will see permanent, positive change in the communities in which we live.

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