

African-American Faith Groups Join Forces

What if the leaders of nine major black denominations came together to work for the betterment of their collective churches and the African-American community?

What if their 50,000 congregations ramped up advocacy efforts in their communities in the areas of economic empowerment, social justice and public policy, education and health?

What if this combined, coordinated faith endeavor really made a difference in the lives of their more than 30 million members as well as others?

Could success come from such a faith collaboration when similar efforts have stagnated or failed?

It remains to be seen, but the leadership of the [Conference of National Black Churches](#) (CNBC), which concluded its first annual consultation in Washington, D.C., on Dec. 7-10, believes it can.

The [faith leaders](#) came from several Methodist and Baptist denominations and the country's largest black Pentecostal denomination, the [Church of God in Christ](#). They united 18 months ago in this [revived movement](#) and are counting on faith, prayer and a renewed spirit of ecumenical cooperation to propel them forward. They are putting aside theological differences to work on a social justice agenda that could transform the church and the African-American community.

That's good news, especially at a time when churches are being called upon to meet the myriad physical needs of their parishioners as they also strive to supply spiritual substance.

CNBC chairman W. Franklyn Richardson, during the ecumenical service, addressed the organization's need to speak with one voice and to act in unity.

“Together we can help raise African-Americans to another level ... and help this nation become its best self,” [Richardson](#) said.

I had the opportunity to attend portions of the meeting, including the church service at Israel Baptist Church and a leadership dinner. Honorees at the dinner were Ambassador [Andrew J. Young](#), Black Enterprise magazine founder [Earl Graves Sr.](#) and health activist [Pernessa C. Seele](#).

In the sessions, discouraging statistics about the predicament of African-Americans were reiterated by speaker after speaker. The litany of woes included high consumer debt; increasing rates of incarceration; poor grades and low graduation rates, especially for young black males; health disparities; and poverty. Fortunately, the CNBC, working with several partners, has some solutions that can be activated by local churches.

Don Coleman, chairman of [Global Hue](#), a marketing and advertising company, is partnering with the CNBC to bring economic empowerment to the black community. A website will be up in January for congregations that will provide financial literacy, promote debt-free living and help recycle consumer dollars to support local church ministries, among other things.

“We have to support ourselves and we can do it,” Coleman told the group. “We have the means. What would happen if we just do what we can do?”

The CNBC also established partnerships to build summer schools and after-school programs for children with the Children’s Defense Fund and to address health disparities with Balm in Gilead, a health advocacy organization started by Seele.

On Dec. 9, the faith leaders issued a letter criticizing Congress for connecting extension of unemployment benefits to tax cuts for the wealthy. They also urged President Obama and Congress to endorse “an extension of unemployment insurance without conditions.”

The overarching goal of the CNBC is worthy and laudable, as the banner looming

over the stage proclaimed it: “For the Healing of Our People.”

What if healing comes through this effort? The potential for such a blessing to the black community is there. What if this time that potential becomes reality?

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