

Clergy try to regain faith, trust of wary followers

By Hazel Trice Edney
Special to Sentinel-Voice

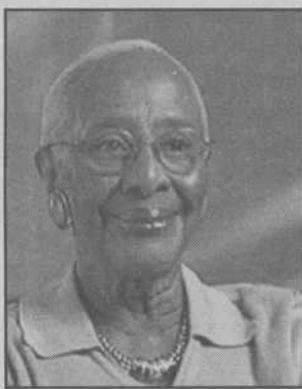
WASHINGTON (NNPA) - Since the last presidential election, Black clergy across the country have been struggling with how to prevent African-Americans from being politically exploited over moral issues while forcing politicians to fight for civil rights and social justice, some leading ministers say.

"When we poll our people now and ask them how many of them know someone [or have a relative] who is dying of cancer or has died of cancer... the majority of our members raise their hands. We ask people how many of them know someone who is in a jail complex, most of them raise their hand," says the Rev. Steven Thurston, president of the 3,000-congregation National Baptist Convention of America and pastor of New Covenant Missionary Baptist Church in Chicago.

"When we check with our churches or our pastors, we didn't have one that said that any one of the same-sex marriage idea had ever asked them to conduct a wedding for them. That's not an issue for us in our community."

Yet, in the November election, President George W. Bush won 2 percent more of the Black vote than he got in 2000, partially because of a re-election campaign that focused largely on same-sex marriages. For example, in Ohio, the GOP benefited from Blacks going to the polls to support a Republican-led referendum to prohibit same-sex marriage.

Approximately 16 percent of Ohio's Black population supported Bush in the state, according to the Joint Center for Political and Economic



"Every church has got to expand its ministry in this new age to deal with homeless, deal with poverty, deal with education and deal with health care."

—Rev. Willie Barrow

Studies, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank. That amounts to about 90,000 voters according to calculations of the U.S. Census Bureau.

Similar scenarios around the nation have caused Black Christian leaders concern. They say issues such as same-sex marriages have distracted African-American Christians at the expense of civil rights and other social issues and they are seeking ways to end it.

"We are victims of weap-

marched, we picketed, we went to jail, we registered to vote, we voted. We had to all those things, and we need to do them all now."

The Black Church has long been a base for political and social movement in the Black community. Before emancipation, slaves would sing hymns that sent hidden messages about the Underground Railroad. Many activities of the modern Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s originated in the Black church.

But November 2004 was different. Before Democrats knew what hit them, Republicans had carefully crafted a strategy to gain Black votes. They



"We must go back to the basics. The basics being that we must represent disenfranchised people, which happen to be Black folks, people of color and poor White folks."

—Charles Steele, Jr.

ons of mass distraction. These are not our issues," says Rev. Joseph Lowery, a civil rights pioneer who is a former president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). He says the Black church must turn back to its traditional ways of fighting for civil rights in order to bring attention to the real problems in the Black and poor communities. "I'm talking about the whole gamut of advocacy," Lowery says. "We never did just one thing. We never just marched. We never just picketed. We did it all. We negotiated. We adjudicated, we

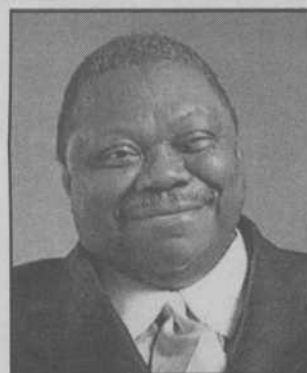
did this, in large measure, by focusing on same-sex marriage, which most African-Americans oppose.

"It was a narrowing of the issues of morality... therefore, in many ways, it was an immoral activity," says Rev. William J. Shaw, president of the 7.5 million-member National Baptist Convention U.S.A. "The Democrats are going to have to take a look at that and do a better job at defining new issues as well as trying to rely on past issues." Shaw was among the leaders of four Black Baptist organizations that met for a week beginning Jan. 24, in Nashville, Tenn., to discuss strategies for working together after 90 years of separation. Simultaneously, President Bush held a meeting on Jan. 25 with some leading Black clerical representatives at the White House.

Rev. Major L. Jemison, president of the 1,500-congregation Progressive National Baptist Convention,

"I think it's very important that we put White folks out of our house, out of our business, out of our churches and come together as brothers and sisters called by the God of our ancestors."

—Rev. Albert "Al" Sampson



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