

CHURCH BURNS: HEALING THE BLACK GAY EXPERIENCE

Shamont Hussey, MSW Candidate, San Francisco State University

The author of this narrative is a 30-year-old, black, gay man. This narrative is a reflection on his experience developing and defining his own sense of self and identity, while being shaped by family, church community, and environment. Sharing personal experiences promotes a better understanding for the relationship between the black church and the black queer community. As background to his personal experience, this narrative offers a brief historical context of the black church. The church is foundational in the development of black culture in America, thus impacting the black queer experience and the author's "coming out" experience.



Genesis to Revelations

I grew up with a stern and traditional Pentecostal Church upbringing, surrounded by oppressive and contradicting forces, within both my community and my family. At times I found myself in conflict and often confused; however, I was clear about one fact: the need for unconditional love and support of family. Both in school and in church, I received clear messages of right and wrong. I was taught the "law of the land" and "God's Law," all of which I had to obey.

However, some of my family and loved ones skewed these lines every day; selling drugs and participating in gangs, violence, and other illicit activities. Though my parents disagreed with the actions of most of my brothers, cousins, and other extended family (engaging in illicit activities), they stressed that they were still family. Though my parents judged them, often reminding them of the errors of their ways, they were still welcomed and accepted by the family. My father offered our house as a sanctuary. They were always welcomed, but no drugs, violence, or drama were allowed in or around the house. Family was valued and cherished above all.

The principles, values, and ethics bestowed upon me by my family and church community fostered a sense of self and self-identity. I knew who I was based upon my family and my community affiliations. I was a reflection of my family and community influences. Therefore, my identity and values were based upon their expectations. I remember listening to the pastor of our church

with open ears and an open heart, eager to receive his approval and validation. The pastor would offer clear and infallible life guidelines and goals: "Be Holy, Live Holy. Young people, you have to live for God. Stay away from temptations of the world (e.g., drugs, alcohol, gangs, gays, and other 'perversions')." He would often remind us of the importance of family, respect of and for our community and culture, as well as rejection of anything different that might threaten our family and/or culture.

The black church has traditionally served as a social and spiritual institution for black culture in America. W.E.B. Du Bois, acclaimed educator, African American protest leader, and co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), references and describes the early black church "as more than mere meeting places, hosting social events, but in fact moral centers of the black community" (as cited in Evans, 2007, p. 289). As this moral center and ethical foundation, the black church has historically accepted key core values: love, inclusiveness, justice, freedom, and equality (Douglas & Hopson, 2000). These values were established under the social and physical oppression of slavery and persecution and seen as sacred and infallible. Coupled with these core values, the black church also embodied contingent values (changing and emerging in response to social and historical circumstances). Historically, these contingent values have reflected what is important for

the black church (community) during the relative era.

In church, I was taught to be obedient. In our obedience to the will of God and our parents, we would receive God's protection and good favor. Throughout most of my pre-adolescence and adolescence, I embraced these expectations, ethics, and values as absolute. I attempted to embody the pastor and church's expectations of an ideal "saved" youth, one who has repented for all sins, living a path of holiness and righteousness and allowing minimal self-reflection and openness to exploring my own thoughts, curiosities, and interests. Anything that failed to fit the mold of an ideal "saved" youth, I had no interest in experiencing. I can remember being afraid that anything outside of what I had been taught threatened my very salvation and cultural preservation.

In high school, most of my peers referred to me as "reverend." I was a leader in my high school choir, and many of my peers confided in me spiritually and emotionally. While seeking peer support and guidance, my peers often disclosed their own adolescent angst and insecurities. I often advised and counseled my peers on issues like dating, pre-marital sex, alcohol, drugs, and, at times, homosexuality. Sadly, I must admit that my counseling and spiritual guidance was merely a shallow reflection of my own oppressive teachings and insecurities. As I look back, I remember restating some very offensive and oppressive biblical proclamations, condemning some of the "out" queer youth at my school. Though I never directly attacked any of these courageous queer youth, it pains me to own my part in perpetuating their oppression, uttering words of church bigotry, hatred, and homophobia. Throughout my charged crusade as a youth minister, I can remember suppressing and battling my own homosexual thoughts, feelings, and curiosities. I cannot begin to count the number of long nights spent praying and repenting for these intense, often arousing, thoughts and feelings.

At the age of 16, I began to openly question my identity, challenging those absolute values I had embraced. In an effort to seek guidance and counsel, I attempted to utilize

the only support system I knew, i.e., my family and church. As I began to ask questions about race, culture, sexual development, and sexual orientation, I received a clear message from my church family and community. Any abnormal thoughts, feelings, and interests were wrong, even perverse. Understandably, this created a great deal of confusion and turmoil within. This identity that I had so clearly defined was solely based upon the values, ethics, and teachings of my stern, traditional (homophobic), Pentecostal upbringing. This adolescent identity crisis challenged the very values, ideals, and beliefs that defined my sense of self: If I am gay, then who am I? Can I be black and gay? How can it be? Does God love gays?



Gays in the Church!

Historically, the black church has stood as a cornerstone for Black Culture. Unfortunately, this cornerstone also stands as a physical, spiritual, and political barrier, forcing many black queers out of the church or into the closet. Today, black churches still have a position of prominence and influence over African American men, women, and children (Jewell, 2003). The role of the black church as a moral center has strengthened the black community in some regards, while damaging the social, spiritual, and physical state of black queers.

Growing up in my church, I can still remember the first time I heard the very mention of gay. There was a brother who came to our church religiously. He would often stand in and play for our youth choir whenever our musician was running late (which was often) or just absent. This brother was truly committed to the youth choir. Often he would stay late to go over songs, harmonies, and lyrics.

I cannot recall if he was necessarily "out." However, he had a little switch to his walk and a light lean to his swagger, which of course meant to everyone, without ever asking, that

he was gay. I remember being ill advised of his “tendencies” in Sunday school. Our teacher would say, “Ya’ll watch out for that brother. I don’t want none of you in the bathroom by yourselves with him. And don’t you touch nothing that he touches. If he comes in the bathroom, ya’ll just come on out.” I can remember my father (who is a church usher), coming in and supervising the bathroom on occasion, specifically whenever this brother happened to take a bathroom break. It was as if they were worried that we would “catch gay.” As I look back, I am embarrassed and saddened by the level of ignorance and insensitivity taught to the church’s children and youth. It was not until later years and after his passing that I recognized this brother in Christ for the courageous and remarkable man that he was.

This experience is an excellent example of the black church’s failure to adhere to its founding core values, and, instead, giving way to secular hysteria, hatred, and homophobia as its contingent values. This discrepancy in values has caused a great deal of conflict within the black church, as well as some ambivalence towards social issues (e.g., queer rights, homophobia, women’s rights, HIV and AIDS education/prevention, etc.). This conflict has resulted in the black church’s hypocritical stance for social justice on one front, while opposing the rights of others on another front.

Leviticus Faggot

I came out at the age of sixteen and was immediately ostracized by my church family and immediate family. Upon coming out, my father explained, “There won’t be any of this sick stuff in my house. I don’t want any faggots living under my roof.” Shortly thereafter, I left home and would never live under his roof again. I was no longer welcomed in the very house other family members had considered a sanctuary. How hurtful and ironic that the unconditional love and support afforded to others failed to apply to me because I was gay. As for my church family, which had been my entire community, I was an abomination. I thought I had nowhere to turn.

In retrospect, this very rejection has fueled my commitment and understanding for the

need of unconditional love and acceptance in the lives of queer youth and adults in the black church. The alienation that I experienced led me on a self-destructive emotional, physical, and spiritual rampage. I can remember a remotely accepting aunt telling me, “You got to live your life for God and come to your own understanding of salvation. Without that, you will be lost.” At the time, I could not begin to comprehend the truth to her statement.

Shortly after leaving my father’s house—I refer to my childhood home as my father’s house because my mother refused to take part in or perpetuate my father’s ignorance or intolerance—I left for college in New Orleans. In my first college experience, I found myself seeking a redefinition of self. Unfortunately, I attempted to define myself by what I thought were the highlights, as portrayed in popular culture, of the gay experience (e.g., reckless sexual exploration, drugs, parties, clubs, etc.). I sought the frivolous ideal of what was my understanding of “gay” by popular culture. I discarded anything and everything that resembled my prior teachings of ethics and values. The very foundation that I once stood upon seemed to have been stripped away; the mystique behind the cloak of my faith was gone. Without this foundation, I found myself searching to become something or someone else. I didn’t know who I was or who I wanted to become. I gave in to what I thought was a fast and fabulous “gay life” of fun, drugs, sex, and clubs. Desperately seeking to become “grand” and “fabulous,” I found myself adrift. I was lost in a fast lifestyle.

Without the family that once defined who I was, I struggled with defining myself as a gay man, or even a black man. For a time, I did not define myself as gay. I thought “gay” was a popular term used to describe the white majority of the homosexual community. In my community and church experience, I had no positive images and/or understanding of gay. In fact, my only understanding and teachings were based upon ignorance, fear, and bigotry. As an “out” gay man, I also struggled with identifying as a black man, feeling rejected by family, community, and culture.

I often felt that I had to choose, either black or gay. I saw no conjunction or middle

ground between the two. In my experience, the two identities (cultures) were often at odds. Even after coming out, I didn't see blacks valued and celebrated in the gay (white) scene and I definitely didn't see gays (whites) celebrated and valued in the black cultural scene. The tension and dichotomy of minorities and race in the queer movement remains staggering and alarming. However, in order to explore this issue, further research and discussion is required.

Revelations to Genesis: Claiming Wholeness

Over the years, I have grown to be proud of all that I am. I am black and gay, and my God loves me. I must admit that my identity achievement came well after adolescence. In all honesty, I like to believe that I am still learning and developing a greater sense of identity. Today, I continue my work fighting for the lives of minorities and queer alike, as a youth counselor and advocate in the field of social work. I have had the privilege of serving the queer community in various capacities; program coordinator, HIV/AIDS prevention counselor and educator, mentor, and community organizer. As a program and service coordinator for a minority queer youth center, I developed innovative programming while providing individual case management and streamlining the existing referral system. My experience in working with the queer community, particularly queer youth, has afforded me a wealth of knowledge and professional insight. As I am honored to have learned so much, I remain committed to advocating and empowering the lives of queers, both inside and outside of the church.

This reflection is in no way offered as an attack on the black church, nor a definitive account of all black queer experiences in the church. Rather, I offer my narrative as a hopeful account and reflection on the evidence of resiliency and the potential for progress and success. The historical context of the black church should remain as a solid foundation for the black community. However, as we progress, so must our contingent values. Regardless of social and political pressures, the black church must adhere to its key core

values: love, inclusiveness, justice, freedom, and equality.

Perhaps understanding the historical construction of the black church and black culture can help the black queer community gain allies in creating social progress and change within the black church, the black community, and other oppressed and disenfranchised communities. Let us not lose another member of our community to oppression, exclusion, or hatred.

Through education and empowerment and adhering to the founding core values, the black church can lead the way for social change, calling for acceptance, inclusion, love, and protection of today's "non-traditional family." I will continue to share my experience, my understanding, and my triumph as a black gay man. I am who I am because of the black church. I am committed to providing underserved communities the tools and opportunities to foster and develop these same core values: love, inclusion, justice, freedom, and equality. My passion, conviction, and dedication in the field of social work all stem from these values. In our struggle, may we continue to rely on our past to direct and inspire our future.

References

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Shamont Hussey is a Lead Case Manager at the Community Assessment and Referral Center (CARC) for Huckleberry Youth Programs in San Francisco. He is also an MSW Candidate at the San Francisco State University School of Social Work. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: shamont1@yahoo.com.

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