

Homophobia in the Black Church

Eradicating Homophobia Through Honest and Respectful Dialogue



Left to Right: Rev. Dr. Ronald Hopson, Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou, Rev. Dr. Kenneth Samuel, Rev. Byron Williams, Donna Payne, Rev. Tony Lee

Building upon People For the American Way Foundation's Protecting Equality work in 2008, the African American Religious Affairs team is continuing the work that began in California, and expanding to a new state, Maryland. Maryland is the home state to the Religious Right's most visible African American spokesperson, Bishop Harry Jackson.

In its first event to begin the dialogue on Homophobia in the Black Church in Maryland, PFAWF joined forces with the Howard Divinity School Student Government Association sponsoring a panel on the topic as part of the March 25-27 Harambee 2009 symposium at the Howard University School of Divinity. People For the American Way Foundation's Program Associate Joi Orr is a seminarian at the Howard University School of Divinity and President of the Student Government Association. Because of Joi's leadership, we were able to have this critical conversation at the Divinity School.

The Homophobia in the Black Church panel, co-hosted by the African American Ministers Leadership Council (AAMLC), was brilliantly moderated by Rev. Tony Lee, Senior Pastor of Community of Hope A.M.E. Church in Temple Hills, MD, and featured AAMLC Vice Chair Rev. Dr. Kenneth Samuel, Senior Pastor of Victory for the World Church in Stone Mountain,

GA; Howard University Professor Rev. Dr. Ronald Hopson; Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou, fellow-in-residence at the Brooklyn (NY) Society for Ethical Culture; Donna Payne, Associate Director of Diversity for the Human Rights Campaign (HRC); and Rev. Byron Williams, syndicated columnist and pastor of the Resurrection Community Church in Oakland, CA.

Howard University Divinity Seminarian Dustin Baker delivered a personal testimony on his own experience growing up Black and gay in the Black Church, and from a family of faith leaders. "I've been victimized in the Church. I have been prophesied against. . . . I've also counseled gay youth in the church. I've lost two people in a counseling session – two youths, one 14 and one 17 where they committed suicide."

Panelists discussed what homophobia is, and what its repercussions are within our churches and communities. Rev. Samuel referenced homophobia as a "health risk."

"And so, what I'm saying is that homophobia is a health risk, especially [for] Black folk. It's a health risk and so for the sake of the lives of people, we have got to explore it, get beyond it, and call the demon what it is, and understand that as long as we continue to allow it and preach it, . . . we are killing our own people."

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—Howard Divinity Seminarian Dustin Baker

Panelists discussed how the Religious Right has used this issue to divide the Black Church. Rev. Sekou pointed out, "what they're attempting to do is exploit this concern around family in our communities. Our families are under attack. . . . It is interesting though that all seven historic Black denominations passed antigay resolutions which came through the work of a [right-wing] group called Institute for Religion and Democracy. . . . But the most visible leaders – 'Black leaders' – of the Black anti-gay movement do not come out of the seven historic denominations. This is interesting to note. Bishop Jackson does not. . . ."

In addition to the Homophobia in the Black Church panel, PFAWF and the African American Ministers in Action (AAMIA) hosted a second panel, "Black Church,

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Rev. Dr. Kenneth Samuel and Rev. Byron Williams

Overheard at the Harambee Panel

Rev. Dr. Kenneth Samuel on religion and the progressive movement:

“The right wing political conservatives have been masterful at forming alliances with Black churches. There is religious intolerance. On the other hand, there is intolerance of religion. And in many progressive circles, they view intolerance of religion – a religion phobia – that is not going to serve the progressive cause well, because you are not going to make public policy change in these United States of America unless you engage the church, and I think progressives have tried to do that to their own detriment which is the reason why, by and large, the gay movement is as milky white today as it was in the days of Harvey Milk.”

Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou on areas of common ground that clergy can agree upon and help promote through our churches and communities:

“One could even argue that being Black is queer. We should be honored that queer folk appropriate our struggles. And so in appropriating our struggles, in appropriating our language, in singing our song is making a claim about what blackness is as a progressive identity. And one could even argue that being black is queer. You’re subject to arbitrary violence. You are oversexualized, and there’s legal structures that are put in place that deny you rights. That sounds like gay folk to me.”

“I’m interviewing for this church with these little old ladies in the Bronx. It was four of them. One, about 85, she about this here tall. So I sat down. They looked at me crazy like I have this long hair and this funny name and so one of them looks at me – the little 85-year-old. ‘Reverend Sekou, what do you think of same sex marriage?’ I was like, ‘Oh, Lord. I can tell what you think of it by the question...’

Am I gonna blow this interview. And she says, ‘And you know what the Bible says.’ I said, ‘Well, Mother, the Bible says women be silent in the church. You got around that, didn’t you?’ Yeah, yeah. I said, ‘It said the slaves be obedient to your masters. We got around that, didn’t we?’ So I think we can get around it... Mother, this is what you taught me. If folks are catching hell, I’m supposed to show up. Gay folk catching hell. I’ve got to show up.”

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Black President: The Role of the Black Church in the Age of Obama,” addressing the contemporary relevance of Black Liberation Theology in light of the 40th anniversary of James Cone’s Black Theology & Black Power and the historic election of President Barack Obama. The panel was moderated by former PFAW staffer Michele Lawrence Jawando (now Counsel to New York Senator Kirsten Gillibrand), and featured Paul Monteiro from the White House Office of Public Liaison; Rev. Mercuria Chase-Williams, representing AAMLC and the National Education Association; Rev. Roland Womack, Chair of AAMLC and Senior Pastor of Progressive Baptist Church in Milwaukee; and Rev. James Coleman, chaplain of the DC NAACP and Senior Pastor of All Nations Baptist Church in Washington, DC.

Panelists discussed the implications for Black churches, the Obama Administration’s Office of Faith Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, and what political strategies beyond the vote must be developed to help bring about community renewal and empowerment, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and healthcare.

The event was featured in *Metro Weekly*, the most popular LGBT magazine in DC, in an article entitled “Poison Pews: African-American leaders talk about homophobia in the black church.”

People For the American Way Foundation and the African American Religious Affairs team are looking forward to continuing this critical dialogue throughout the state of Maryland and California in 2009 and 2010.

Donna Payne on the manifestation of the Homophobia in Black Churches and in the communities:

“I wanted to put out there what it looks like the manifestation of this fear and this hate within the community around homosexuals, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered. As an associate director, I’ve been doing this work for 11 years at the Human Rights Campaign, and there was a moment when I had a conversation with my mother and said, ‘Hey, there’s some opportunities that I think I want to speak out on, and I’m gonna eventually end up on TV. I’m gonna eventually end up on CNN, and so I just want you to know I will be as an African American lesbian on CNN.’ She said, ‘Oh, my goodness. Look, I love you. Do you have to tell everybody?’ That is what every lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender African American faces. And the first frontier is within the church and their family.

We recently did an “Equality Forward” survey of 5,000 people of color LGBT, and one of the big things that stuck out throughout the whole survey is that African Americans are concerned and worried about the church and how they’re perceived and do not feel safe. So they are in a dilemma.

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They don't want to leave the African American church, and they don't want to go into the so called "gay church" because they don't feel comfortable. They've grown up within the African American church. However, they can't stand the bashing.

The violence is the number two thing. First is the church and then violence within the family and then with society. So the violence is coming from within the family and then the society...

You're a gay male. 'How dare you?' from your uncle and then you get beat up. That's the first thing – daddy, uncle, brother, sister. So it's real important so you understand the manifestation, what we're dealing with."

Rev. Byron Williams on giving credence to the pain that gays and lesbians feel because of homophobia:

"If Dr. Samuel has his foot – unintentionally has his foot on my neck – okay – he doesn't mean to do it. He's not trying to do it. ...My neck just happens to be in the way of his walking, but the pain that I'm realizing is still real nonetheless. So if I asked him to, 'Dr. Samuel, my neck hurts.' He says, 'I'm not trying.' That don't matter. It's pain that I realize, and I think that we always have to give some credence to the pain that the oppressed experience.

And so when homophobia is part of our culture. I mean just part of our culture, just like racism can be part of our culture, like misogyny...

Fundamentalists view the Bible the way a drunk uses a lamppost – always for support and never for illumination."

Dr. Ronald Hopson on whether believing that homosexuality is a sin means you're homophobic:

"I think everybody has permission to be whoever and whatever they are. So I think homophobic people, we have to first state that you have a reason to be homophobic. I'm heterophobic. Straight, black men scare me sometimes. ...

So, first of all, I think there's room for you at the table if you're homophobic. You have to decide if you're homophobic. I wouldn't agree that necessarily anyone who believes that homosexuality is wrong is homophobic. I think you're profoundly miseducated, and I think a lot of us are profoundly miseducated by a group of pastors who themselves have been miseducated.

And so I think the work for us is to do the work of educating people, and then you find wherever you are and meet wherever you are once, I think, you're educated. ...

Now there may be other reasons why you think it is wrong having to do with your own... I'm a psychologist by training and clinician, so I get all sorts of stories, and I understand totally why some folks are homophobic, and I understand totally why some folks are heterophobic. It has nothing to do necessarily with their indoctrination. It may have to do with their own history of abuse and history of exploitation. That's a different matter."

The Homophobia in the Black Church panel was videotaped, and People For the American Way Foundation will be releasing the transcript online and in hard copy.

**OPINION EDITORIAL:
An Exhilarating Conversation**

*By Peter Montgomery, Senior Fellow
People For the American Way Foundation*

On Thursday, March 26, a panel of African American clergy, academics, and activists gathered at Howard University School of Divinity for a forum on Homophobia and the Black Church. If you're already forming a mental picture of a dry panel discussion in an academic setting, let it go. This was an impassioned conversation filled with breathtaking moments of people revealing their personal truth and challenging destructive elements of the spiritual traditions they love.

As someone who professionally chronicles the Religious Right, I've watched with dismay that movement's aggressive outreach to the Black Church – a spiritually cynical operation grounded in spreading lies about religious liberty and stoking resentment at gay activists' use of the symbols and language of the civil rights movement. As a gay white man, I felt privileged to sit in on a conversation in a prestigious African American seminary that had some people cheering and some reeling over the brutal honesty about issues that prevent homophobia – and sexuality more broadly – from being dealt with openly and honestly in the Black Church.

Dustin Baker, an openly gay divinity student at Howard, opened the session with remarks that made it clear this would not be some abstract conversation. There he stood, as someone who loves the Black Church and feels a call from God to preach, but who faces a very hard time answering that call.

The conversation among the panelists was so powerful because there was no "there" that the panelists were unwilling to go: they took on scripture, tolerance of heterosexual clergy misconduct, and the deeply damaging consequences of homophobia preached from the pulpit.

Rev. Dr. Kenneth Samuel, Senior Pastor of Victory for the World (Stone Mountain, GA) and Vice Chair of the African American Ministers Leadership Council said there's no way to address the issue without acknowledging and confronting the "toxic texts" in the Bible. Samuel described Biblical literalism as "dangerous" – he said you can't take the Bible seriously if you say you take it literally – and he urged Christians to grapple with those texts in the context of the all-encompassing love of Jesus. Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou, Fellow in Residence at the Brooklyn Society for Ethical Culture, also challenged what he called "idolatry" toward the Bible, noting that Black Christians had found ways around passages on slavery and women being silent in the church.

Rev. Byron Williams, syndicated columnist and pastor of the Resurrection Community Church in Oakland, CA was powerfully unapologetic in his insistence on the Constitution: when it comes to equality in the legal realm, it shouldn't matter where you come

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down on religious questions about the meaning of marriage. But he also discussed a theology focused on the cross as the embodiment, or intersection, of the imperfection of humankind and the grace of God, and urged people to err on the side of love.

Rev. Sekou challenged the treatment of homosexuality as “other” – something outside of “blackness.” He said that African Americans who are proud of the community’s progressive history and struggle for civil rights should be “honored” rather than complaining that “queer people are appropriating our struggle.” And he urged an honest look at the Black Church and the “mythology” of its civil rights heroism, noting that a very small percentage of African American churches and clergy initially supported Martin Luther King and other civil rights activists.

Rev. Samuel talked about how bad theology contributes to bad health: “Homophobia is a health risk. If I believe I’m doomed to hell, why take care of myself and use a condom? And if I think you’re already condemned to hell for wanting to have sex with me, why should I care about you enough to take care of you?” Once again, he took the consequences of homophobic preaching out of the abstract and into the daily and deadly realm. Rev. Dr. Ronald Hopson, psychologist and ordained minister who holds a joint appointment as a professor with the Howard University Department of Psychology and the School of Divinity called out the church for its silence on sexuality issues and for too often “preferring death to truth.”

Rev. Sekou got into dangerous territory talking about the erotic nature of Pentecostal worship and the vulnerability of many women toward the “real man” figure of the preacher. He urged male seminary students not to abuse their power, not to “pimp” their calling to ministry.

Also participating in the panel was Donna Payne, HRC’s Associate Director of Diversity, who oversees their work in the Black Church. Payne explored the tension experienced by LGBT African Americans who maintain their membership in churches that all too often don’t support them.

Rev. Tony Lee, Senior Pastor of Community of Hope AME Church in Temple Hills, Maryland, was a brilliant moderator. He could see that part of the audience was thrilled by the con-



Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou and Donna Payne

versation and that some weren’t buying it. He worked hard to keep the panel from preaching only to the choir and to have them deal with the difficulty of reaching people who have not yet been convinced to look differently at culture, tradition, or scriptural interpretation.

The Homophobia and the Black Church panel was part of a series of events cosponsored by the Howard University School of Divinity Student Government Association and People For the American Way Foundation and its African American Ministers Leadership Council, with support from the National Education Association’s Office of Minority Outreach.

It was intellectually and spiritually exhilarating to hear this powerfully honest dialogue about the ways that Black people are being hurt by the Black Church, and to hear clergy offer seminarians and churchgoers new and intellectually and spiritually authentic ways to approach questions of sexuality and scripture, same-sex love and the love ethic of Jesus, and religious freedom and constitutional equality.

Let’s take this show on the road!

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Perspectives on the Panel

“I just want to have more of these conversations. Discussion of sexuality in the Black Church and in our homes is often the elephant in the room. The poor communication between parent and child about sexuality, or the church and congregants on sexuality translate into poor relationships, especially for our homosexual brothers and sisters who fall to the back burner of these conversations and suffer greatly from homophobic understandings.”

—**Dennis Nelson** (*heterosexual African American male*)

“The Harambee panel showed us voices all too often missing in mainstream discourse: progressive black clergy engaging controversial issues in a nuanced, compelling manner.”

—**Patrick St. John** (*heterosexual White male*)

“It was a brutally honest and powerful dialogue that should serve as a wake-up call to all of us in the LGBT community. While this isn’t an easy conversation to have in the Black Church and the community at large, we cannot write them off as inherently homophobic when we haven’t even done the basics – and that’s just having the conversation.”

—**Sergio Lopez** (*gay Latino male*)

“I have never before seen a panel so powerfully command the attention of an audience the way this panel did. Students, faculty, and guests alike were on the edge of their seats from the beginning to the end. I kept turning around to see if it was just me – and it wasn’t.”

—**Joi Orr** (*heterosexual African American female*)