

Sunday mornings always seem to dawn brilliant and clear, even amongst the damp grey winter days in New York. Each weekend my home was thrown into cheerful disorder as my mother struggled to clothe my sister and me in our frilly Sunday best and hurry us off to the nearby AME Church where the Reverend's lilting voice eased over the pews and the congregation punctuated his sermon with declarations of Hallelujah and Amen.

The Church is the foundation upon which many black communities rely for comfort and guidance. Black Churches emerged over 200 years ago when bondsmen grew weary of sermons encouraging their obedience and loyalty to slave-holders. The first black churches were informal and sometimes secretive gatherings in which African Americans were able to worship as they deemed appropriate and they were most often separate from established churches. They were conceived during slavery and thrived in its aftermath. As African Americans began moving out of rural areas and into cities they created communities and established churches intended to serve black populations. The Black Church has historically played a vital role in community building, education, the dissemination of ideas and provided sanctuary from oppressive social conditions.

Slavery is the institution on which the United States prospered and remains the brutal history Americans uncomfortably acknowledge. Although legalized slavery was dissolved in 1865 by the Thirteenth Amendment we as Americans continue to grapple with its echoes. The Civil Rights Movement enacted monumental change in the experiences of black Americans, ending legal segregation and discrimination. Despite the incredible achievements during that era the experiences of African Americans remained difficult long after the end of the American Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement and black churches served as an alternative to that reality. Some of the most unwieldy obstacles are the feelings of guilt, shame and bitterness evoked by

the knowledge of slavery. They hinder vital conversations about race relations in the United States.

When I arrived in Houston's Third Ward I began my exploration by walking down Dowling Street, once the central nerve of the neighborhood. As I walked around the neighborhood and spoke with its residents I learned about some of the challenges the neighborhood faces. Amongst them are drugs, crime, poverty and gentrification. Another of my discoveries was that the Third Ward is a neighborhood peppered with churches much like the one I attended as a child. These churches ranged from prominent and historic to small store-front places of worship but each of them evoked a sense of isolation.

On Sunday morning I walked into Christian Faith Missionary Baptist Church and found that I was at once inside the Third Ward and removed from it. I had entered a world with a separate code of conduct and dress. Church on Sunday morning was both formal and jovial as members of the congregation respectfully and enthusiastically greeted one another and welcomed visitors. Older men were dressed in suits and somber polished shoes while the women donned elaborate hats and their finest jewelry.

The sermon emphasized individual spiritual growth, focusing heavily on biblical messages without confronting the challenges the community faces. The black church began as a religious and social sanctuary and evolved into an enclave where African American traditions are valued and preserved. Here African Americans are able to shoulder responsibilities and positions of power in addition to garnering respect. The role of the black church as a retreat from social difficulties persists but is that distance ultimately beneficial or detrimental to the members of the congregation?