

Black Megachurch Culture

A review of *Black Megachurch Culture: Models for Education and Empowerment* by Sandra L. Barnes (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. 2010. 166 pp., ISBN: 978-1-4331-0908-90) by Eric R. Jackson (jacksoner@nku.edu), Associate Professor of History, Department of History and Geography; Black Studies Program; Northern Kentucky University.

Historically African American churches have been sources of strength, education, and empowerment for thousands of people of color. The Black American church experience was based upon on various religious elements such as songs, prayers, sermons, and theologies. These institutions also has both motivated and encouraged many believers routinely through their triumphs and tragedies in the history of our nation. However, during the past few decades the growth of large Black American congregations (sometimes called mega-churches) has seemingly altered the experience and purpose of hundreds of African American churches as a result of their enormous size and various types of ministries. This phenomenon has received only scant attention from most scholars. The book under review here seeks to address this shortcoming.

In *Black Megachurch Culture: Models for Education and Empowerment*, Sandra L. Barnes discusses how African American mega-churches was built on the historical legacy of the Black American church movement because of its use of various religious vernaculars and rituals that are embedded in worship, theology, racial beliefs, programming campaigns, and other tools that aim to address and stress the concepts of societal success and good stewardship for its thousands of followers. The author also seeks to capture “some of the dynamic inner workings of Black mega-churches that result in a seemingly static model of success” (pp. 10-11) as well as illustrate how these institutions “will continue to impinge upon societies’ expectations about acceptable religious spaces” (p. 12).

This brief but potent book is divided into five main chapters and includes a separate introductory and conclusion section. In her first chapter Barnes describes some of the general features of African American mega-churches as well as the connection of these facilities with the cultural heritage and historical legacy of the Black American church movement. Within these pages, the author concludes that “by tapping into the strength found in Black Church culture, the best of other Christian traditions, and the dynamics from secular society,” Black American mega-churches have developed and cultivated strategic plans as well as created a desired atmosphere of “spiritual living” and “temporal blessings” that will led to the continued expansion of such facilities for many decades to come (p. 33).

In the next chapter Barnes turns to the topic of worship. According to the author, the function of worship in these African American mega-churches serves more than the traditional celebratory purpose. It is “about expectations, preparation for volunteerism, and a certain kind of lifestyle outside of [the] church walls” (p. 42). Barnes next three chapters focus is on the inner workings used by various African American church-leaders to provide spiritual and practical instructions for its members, the theology that the these facilities rest upon, and the educational philosophy that Black American mega-churches expounds to their many followers. The author concludes that within these various areas, the main goal of African American mega-churches “is to establish, reinforce, and codify the relationship between godly, victorious living, self-efficacy, and intra-church connectedness” (p. 157).

Black Megachurch Culture is a well-researched, outstanding, and provocative piece of scholarship that succinctly shows the continuous expansion of African American mega-churches as a result of the abilities of the leaders of this religious movement to construct a model of success that fosters feelings of high energy, enormous excitement, and great expectations from its church members. For this aspect alone the author should be congratulated and praised. However, the one shortcoming is that there seems to be very little critical analysis of this current African American religious movement on any coherent level. Despite this slight weakness, this study helps to fill a large-gap in the literature in both American and African American religious history as well as is a must read for any person of faith.