

Africentric church: A visit to Chicago's Trinity UCC

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [May 29, 2007](#) issue

One of the brightest points in Barack Obama's rising political star has been his ability to talk about Jesus without faking it. Beginning with his rousing "Audacity of Hope" speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention and continuing with his book of the same name, Obama has shown that he can speak about his Christian faith in ways that are authentic and broadly appealing.

Little wonder that his enemies have tried to turn that strength into a liability. Right-wing bloggers and TV pundits have been targeting Obama's church, Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, and its pastor, Jeremiah Wright, complaining that its self-proclaimed Africentric Christianity is separatist or even racist. Obama's campaign has itself pulled back a bit from being identified with Wright. In February it revoked an invitation to have him give the opening prayer when Obama announced his run for the presidency.

Africentrism (that's the term Trinity prefers to Afrocentrism) is wholeheartedly embraced at Trinity. One of the church's mottos is "Unashamedly Black and Unapologetically Christian." Its choir is regularly decked out in brightly colored African dress, as is Wright when he preaches. The church emphasizes its connection to the African diaspora: it sponsors trips to western and southern Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin American countries with significant African populations. Julia Speller, a leader at Trinity and author of *Walkin' the Talk: Keepin' the Faith in Africentric Congregations*, notes in her book that the church offers courses in Swahili and that its youth programs, Intonjane and Isuthu, take their names from Swahili words for coming into manhood and womanhood. The congregation celebrates the Kwanzaa holiday and Umoja Karamu, a Thanksgiving Day service that narrates the story of the black family from its West African origins to today with dancing, drumming and storytelling.

Bible courses at Trinity emphasize the African roots of Christianity, focusing on the account of the Exodus and such passages as the psalmist's promise that Ethiopia would stretch out its hands to God (Ps. 68:31), and the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. In his preaching Wright goes out of his way to describe Moses as "an African prince" and his wife as a "raven-black" beauty. He declares that Jesus himself had "nappy hair" and "bronze skin" (he cites Rev. 1:14-15). Otis Moss III, who will succeed Wright upon his retirement this summer, says that the church is proud of its "Africanity," proud that "when we talk about Sudan, we have Sudanese present."

African Americans have generated distinctly black forms of Christianity since they arrived on these shores. The significance of these forms has been appreciated in mainline seminaries and churches for at least two generations. Trinity is well within the mainstream of the black church, and is remarkable in the mainline world only for its size and influence and for its handful of celebrity members, like Oprah Winfrey and hip-hop artist Common.

Critics have pounced especially on the church's "Black Value System," by which members affirm their commitment to God, the "black community," the "black family" and the "black work ethic," and disavow "the pursuit of 'middle-classness.'" One hatchet-job report in *Investor's Business Daily*, pointing to the Black Value System (a statement written not by Wright but by church members in the early 1980s), concluded that there is "little room for white Christians at Obama's church." Black conservative pundit Erik Rush said the church has embraced "things African above things American," and he claimed that this should be as alarming as a Republican presidential candidate "belonging to the Aryan Brethren Church of Christ." Tucker Carlson of MSNBC described Trinity as having a "racially exclusive theology" that "contradicts the basic tenets of Christianity." Sean Hannity of Fox News confronted Wright on TV and asked how a black value system is any more acceptable than a white value system. Hannity also suggested that Trinity's emphasis on black values contradicts Martin Luther King's famous hope that people would be judged "not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

Such charges are really aimed at Obama, rather than Wright or Trinity. By trying to link Obama to black radicals, they attack one of Obama's political assets: his seeming ability—shared by Colin Powell, Oprah Winfrey and Michael Jordan—to "transcend" race. Because Obama is able to do this, he invites the white support

that Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson lack (which perhaps explains the decided coolness of some black leaders toward Obama's candidacy).

Wright's critics completely ignore America's history of racism as well as the impact of the civil rights movement and the struggles of the black church to communicate the gospel's relevance in the black community. Perhaps, as one blogger suggests, the attacks on Wright and Trinity are not even "meant to stand up to scrutiny." They are merely designed to tie Obama to images of "the black bogeyman." As with the Swiftboating of John Kerry, it does not matter that the claims are false as long as they are out there.

A sympathetic profile of Obama in *Rolling Stone* quoted this jeremiad from one of Wright's sermons: "Racism is how this country was founded and how this country is still run! . . . We believe in white supremacy and black inferiority and believe it more than we believe in God . . . And. And *And!* Gawd! Has GOT! To be SICK! OF THIS SHIT!" This may be the kind of passion that Obama now finds a bit embarrassing. The sermon was actually delivered as part of the inauguration of a new dean of the chapel at Howard University, whom Wright was encouraging to take on a prophetic role, not just a priestly one. But all that was posted on YouTube was a video of Wright shouting the words above.

Ironically, Wright says that in that part of the sermon he was quoting white evangelical preacher Tony Campolo, who has long railed about social ills in front of evangelical audiences. One of Campolo's signature rhetorical gestures is to use colorful language and tell his listeners that he fears they are "more concerned that I said 'shit'" than with racism in America. When Campolo makes this move, he's regarded as a prophetic figure. When Wright does it, his opponents call him a militant.

Trinity did not set out to be an Africentric church when it was founded. The goal of United Church of Christ leaders was to create an integrated church at a time when whites were not much interested in integration. But the UCC was also interested in finding "the right kind of black people," according to Speller—those who were middle class and "high potential" enough to integrate easily into the majority-white denomination. Congregationalist missionaries who established black colleges and universities throughout the South in the late 19th century insisted that educated blacks eliminate displays of emotion in singing and preaching. That's why graduates of Morehouse College and Howard University (where no gospel music was allowed

until the late 1960s, according to Wright) abandoned black ways of worship.

In a recent essay, Wright summarized the early 1960s vision of integration: “Blacks should adopt a white lifestyle, a white way of worship, European values, and European American ways of viewing reality” (in *Growing the African-American Church*). One of the UCC’s few black ministers in the 1960s actually said from the pulpit, “We will tolerate no ‘niggerisms’ in our services.” This meant, Wright explains, that “no one could shout. . . . There would be no hand waving. There would be no displays of emotion.”

Wright dates the collapse of this vision to 1968. The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. “was enough to make a negro turn black,” he says, borrowing a phrase. By this point, a large segment of the black community had turned against King’s Christian, nonviolent challenge to racial segregation. Chicago was an organizing center for militant black religious groups like the Nation of Islam and the Black Hebrew Israelites. Ironically, these groups, with whom conservatives today would like to lump Obama and Wright, are the very ones against which the young Jeremiah Wright was arguing while in graduate school in the 1960s—trying to make the case that Christianity is not a white racist religion.

It was in this climate of radical black activism that Wright set out to show what a church steeped in Christianity’s long-neglected Africanity could look like. It took courage, Speller points out, for a black pastor to work “without apology” in a white denomination that seemed hopelessly corrupt to black nationalists. The militants didn’t understand “the radicality of genuine Christianity,” observes James Cone, a theologian at Union Theological Seminary in New York and a longtime colleague of Wright’s, who made a similar triangulating move.

When Wright arrived at Trinity in 1971 he helped the congregation ask, “Are we going to be a black church in the black community . . . or are we going to continue to be a white church in blackface?” Wright introduced revival hymns like “Nothing but the Blood” and “What a Fellowship.” Then he added an altar call to the service. Drums, tambourines and even a washboard became part of the music. A youth choir asked permission to sing gospel music, and on its first Sunday the group “came in ‘stepping’ like members of an Omega Psi Phi [a traditional black fraternity] step show” and wearing red and green dashikis. Adults then started asking if they could join the youth choir. Today nothing announces the church’s commitment to unapologetic black Christianity more than its huge choir, which sways and sings in

African dress, leading the hand-waving and the Amens.

These years also spawned the church's other motto: "In the heart of the community, ever seeking to win the community's heart." Trinity's location on Chicago's South Side is crucial to understanding its history and mission. Wright has written that it is hard to imagine a church like Trinity "taking place in Maine" (in *Living Stones in the Household of God*). In Trinity's neighborhood, children on their way home from elementary school are recruited by the Nation of Islam. The church sits just blocks from an enormous federal housing project built in the 1940s (home to a population that the original self-consciously middle-class congregation tried to overlook).

Trinity's rootedness in its neighborhood does not prevent it from having a global impact. Chicago's many seminaries regularly send students to intern at Trinity or just observe its ministry. Wright has sent dozens of students into ministry, many of them women. UCC youth groups from throughout Illinois travel to Trinity to learn about evangelism and racial justice. "They have a ball," Moss said of the wide-eyed white kids visiting Trinity most Sundays. "They say 'Is this a UCC church?'"

Moss sees Trinity's Africentrism as crucial to its success. "Churches that are, say, Lutheran first, but then just happen to be black secondarily don't grow. We're a black church first—one that just happens historically to be UCC." Moss is troubled when I remind him that Trinity is criticized as being "separatist." Trinity made a conscious decision to serve the community when whites were fleeing to the suburbs. "People who won't even come to the 'hood criticize us for being in the 'hood," he said. Understanding Trinity's social context helps one understand the church's critique of middleclassness. With increased access to prosperity and social status, blacks can imitate the white families who fled the area in the 1950s for the greener pastures of the suburbs.

Obama's first book, *Dreams from My Father*, recounts an exchange he had with Wright over black middleclassness. A church secretary was planning a move to the suburbs so her son could have a better life. Wright's response was: "That boy of hers is gonna get out there and won't have a clue about where, or who, he is." Obama defended the secretary, suggesting that the boy would be safer outside the inner city. Wright replied, "Life's not safe for a black man in this country, Barack. Never has been. Probably never will be." Black flight, Wright seemed to be saying, is no better for those who flee than for those who are left behind.

When the first criticisms of Obama's church came to the senator's attention, he seemed genuinely perplexed. He converted to Christianity at Trinity, responding to one of Wright's altar calls, weeping beneath an old wooden cross as he promised to follow Jesus. He told the *Chicago Tribune*: "I would be puzzled that they would object or quibble with the bulk of a document [the Black Value System] that basically espouses profoundly conservative values of self-reliance and self-help."

Dwight Hopkins, a member of Trinity and a professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School, argues that the church is within the mainstream of black churches and as such is socially conservative. Its emphasis on education harkens back to the days when black parents worked two and three jobs to educate their children, since schooling was one thing "they can't take from you." Moss, noting the church's tutoring, SAT preparation and scholarship programs, said, "We place more African-American students in college than any other organization in Chicago." Hopkins pointed to the church's annual marriage retreat, in which "500 black couples study the Bible's views on marriage together," as more evidence of the church's focus on traditional concerns: the Bible and the family. Obama himself believes that he could explain the Black Value System to people in Iowa and "get a few Amens."

Trinity's critics speak as though it is a political organization constantly advocating for social change, like Operation PUSH or the National Action Network. But it is neither more nor less than a church. "Trinity's activism is a write-your-elected-official activism, not one that mobilizes thousands to picket," Hopkins said. The only signs of politics that I saw in Trinity's packed worship bulletin the day I visited were a list of polling places in advance of an upcoming citywide election and a reminder to "boycott Wal-Mart." Not exactly the stuff of revolution.

There is no denying, however, that a strand of radical black political theology influences Trinity. James Cone, the pioneer of black liberation theology, is a much-admired figure at Trinity. Cone told me that when he's asked where his theology is institutionally embodied, he always mentions Trinity. Cone's groundbreaking 1969 book *Black Theology and Black Power* announced: "The time has come for white America to be silent and listen to black people. . . . All white men are responsible for white oppression. . . . Theologically, Malcolm X was not far wrong when he called the white man 'the devil.' . . . Any advice from whites to blacks on how to deal with white oppression is automatically under suspicion as a clever device to further enslavement." Contending that the structures of a still-racist society need to be dismantled, Cone is impatient with claims that the race situation in America has

improved. In a 2004 essay he wrote, “Black suffering is getting worse, not better. . . . White supremacy is so clever and evasive that we can hardly name it. It claims not to exist, even though black people are dying daily from its poison” (in *Living Stones in the Household of God*).

Wright agrees. When I asked him whether white Americans are right to maintain that the racial situation has improved since the days when Africentric Christianity was born, Wright pointed to the racist remarks by radio host Don Imus: “And you say things have improved?”

When I asked Otis Moss and Dwight Hopkins about the attacks on Trinity, they both noted that ethnic versions of Christianity are commonplace among white Christians—Greek Orthodoxy, Irish Catholicism, German Lutheranism. Why, they wonder, is that kind of ethnocentrism permissible for whites, but Africentric Christianity is not legitimate for blacks?

Wright’s preaching regularly draws attention to standards of beauty in America that drive black women to use beauty products and hair styling to make themselves appear more white. “The church should be the place where children of color see themselves in a positive light,” Moss has written (*The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip Hop Generation*). It is hard to see any Christian disagreeing with these tenets of black Christianity.

“We are descendants of Africa, not England,” Wright has written. “We have a culture that is African in origin—not European. The Bible we preach from came from a culture that was not English or European” (*Blow the Trumpet in Zion*). In his teaching Wright refers to the Holy Land as “northeast Africa,” pointing out that such a designation is not less absurd than calling the land of Israel and Jesus “the Middle East.” For Wright the church’s theology needs to be reworked along African rather than European lines. Moss quotes theologian James Evans, who sees links between the incarnation and black Christianity: “The two stubborn facts of African-American Christian existence are that God has revealed God’s self to the black community and that this revelation is inseparable from the historic struggle of black people for liberation.”

Black intellectuals have often insisted that white identity itself has been built on black oppression. Moss quoted James Baldwin to me, “If I’m not who you think I am then you’re not who you think you are.” When James Cone says “Jesus is a black

man” or “racism is America’s original sin,” the very vehemence of white Christians’ negative reaction shows how alive these issues still are.

But the naming of sin is never the last word in black preaching. James Baldwin also wrote in a famous letter to his nephew that “you must accept [white people] and accept them with love. . . . They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand. . . . We cannot be free until they are free.”

Moss summarized the history of the black church this way: “We have always worshiped with one foot in the soil of our present pain and another foot in our future hope” (*The Gospel Remix*). After our interview, he offhandedly mentioned Sojourner Truth. “She was a slave, she was raped multiple times, she could’ve said ‘God can’t use me.’ But she didn’t.” The black church doesn’t just talk about the Exodus, or even describe the black church’s own Exodus. It relives the Exodus, right there on Sunday morning.

Indeed, Trinity is a complex place. It incorporates not only the classic texts of black theology but shows the influence of the Pentecostal tradition’s emphasis on spiritual gifts and healing and the black church’s emphasis on personal revival. At the service I attended the music leader dragged out the last hymn, slowly intoning “there’s still one more” as the congregation waited for a last soul to join the dozen or so already assembled at the front, seeking salvation.

At the same time, Wright pushes back against prosperity preachers like T. D. Jakes and Creflo Dollar. Such “prosperity pimps” preach that capitalism is “synonymous with Christianity” (*Blow the Trumpet in Zion*), he complains. Wright also counters the black church’s traditional conservatism on issues like homosexuality and gender. Trinity has a singles class called “Same Gender Loving,” and Wright has encouraged women into pastoral ministry throughout his career. Trinity’s own disavowal of middleclassness sits uneasily with its thousands of middle-class to upper-class members, whose BMWs and Audis create traffic jams on 95th Street every Sunday morning and evening.

Wright’s particular genius is his ability to hold all these emphases together. He’s a black pastor of a black church that is the largest congregation in a mostly white denomination. He’s the spiritual shepherd of black nationalists and Christian pacifists. He remarked in one sermon that both his “intellectual friends” and his “nationalist friends” wish he wouldn’t talk so much about heaven, since Christian

talk of heaven seems to denigrate the quest for justice on earth. His litany in response ran through the whole of the scripture in the best tradition of black preaching: “If I drop heaven, I’m going to lose the first verse in my Bible. . . . If I drop heaven, I’m going to lose two of my Ten Commandments. . . . If I get rid of heaven, I’m going to get rid of what happened when Jesus was baptized. . . . If I drop heaven, I’m going to have to stop praying my favorite prayer, ‘Our Father.’ . . . If I drop heaven, I’m going to have to do away with the Second Coming; I’m going to have to get rid of Pentecost. I’m going to have to throw Revelation out of my Bible. . . . Don’t make me drop heaven” (*What Makes You So Strong?*).

I asked Wright what response white churches should make to his Africentric gospel. He referred to a crash course on inner-city ministry he used to teach to white seminarians. He would close the course by telling them that the final exam was this: when their friends or family or parishioners exhibited racism, the students should speak up. If they didn’t, they failed the course. And only they and God would know.

One of the actions for which Wright has been criticized politically is a trip he took to Cuba in the early 1980s. His Spanish-language translator for the trip was a young woman who needed his sermon manuscript in advance, since she had never learned a religious vocabulary. He didn’t have a manuscript to send, so when he met her, he instructed her in the basics of the faith. During his sermon, he realized that the congregation was reacting to the translator—waving handkerchiefs, shouting, “Go ahead, baby! Go ahead, baby!” Wright realized that “she wasn’t translating one word I was saying. She had accepted the Lord Jesus Christ and was over there praising him” (*What Makes You So Strong?*).

The miracle (no lesser word is appropriate) of the black church is that the sons and daughters of Africa embrace rather than eschew the faith they first learned from their white slavemasters, and that they have renewed it again and again out of their own struggles. Conservatives may find the Africentric church too political, and liberals may squirm over its revivalist emotion. But the black church continues to make converts in unlikely places, reflecting a God who makes a way where there is no way.