

The Beyoncé Mass places black women’s stories at the center—and proclaims God’s love

## **The music gets people in the door. Yolanda Norton’s preaching might be what sticks to their bones.**

by [Faith J. Jones](#) in the [June 17, 2020](#) issue



CONNECTION: The Black Girl Magic Ensemble and a local choir sing during the Beyoncé Mass in Atlanta on March 2. (Photo by Faith J. Jones)

Growing up in the 1970s as an African American woman in the South, my widowed Baptist mother was not playin’ when it came to waking up her children and ensuring we were properly dressed and prepared for church. She had rules for us: Take your Bible. Pay attention. You better not misbehave (talk, laugh, chew gum, or fall asleep—especially fall asleep).

It seemed brutal to me, as a kid, to sit still and listen to someone talk for an hour, especially the older preacher with no degrees after his name who called the biblical juniper tree the “Jennifer tree” and the virtuous woman the “virgin woman.”

Per Mama's rules, we also couldn't "listen to the blues" on Sunday—this meant any secular music. Sundays, above all days, were sacred.

Those memories flooded my mind when I heard about the Beyoncé Mass that, prior to the coronavirus pandemic, was taking place in several cities throughout the country. Hebrew Bible professor Yolanda Norton used the megastar's songs to create a worship service with womanist themes. I wondered, How do you mix Beyoncé's empowering yet edgy music with church? At least, with the church I was raised in?

In my day, to hear a word like *bitch* uttered in church would be just blasphemous. So when I heard that Beyoncé's song "Flaws and All"—"I'm a train wreck in the morning. / I'm a bitch in the afternoon"—was used in the service, my interest was piqued even more.

I wasn't alone. On March 2, Spelman College's chapel kicked off its Women's Herstory Month programming with the Beyoncé Mass. At the event, Tresa Jennings of Atlanta told me she read about it in the local newspaper. She came to Spelman, a prestigious African American women's college in Atlanta, "to see how they would incorporate [Beyoncé's] work into an actual church service."

When I walked into the chapel before the service began, a huge screen said "Beyoncé Mass." I was told to sit anywhere except the first few rows—they were reserved for Spelman students. A group of excited students in the first row were already dancing and singing Beyoncé's "Love on Top," which was playing over the chapel's sound system. I could tell this was going to be an exciting service just from the mood of the crowd.

Earlier I caught up with Norton, organizer of the Beyoncé Mass and chair of black church studies at San Francisco Theological Seminary, via telephone. She was at the airport traveling to Spelman. This would be her ninth Beyoncé Mass since she began them in 2018.

Beyoncé's music is empowering but also edgy. How do you mix it with church?

That year was when Norton, a 37-year-old author with a powerhouse voice, first taught the course Beyoncé and the Hebrew Bible at SFTS. It focuses on black women and their relationship with the Bible. Norton said Beyoncé's status in the world gives her a unique voice to narrate the realities of black women. Teaching the class

inspired Norton to use a liturgy based on several of Queen Bey's songs to empower black women and help them face various issues they encounter. The Beyoncé Mass grew from there as more people wanted to experience it in their church, community, or university.

Norton explained that singing Beyoncé's music during the service is akin to having a conversation with God—using the words of a black woman who happens to be an award-winning, global entertainer.

"It's about centering the spirituality in the story of black women," she said.

I asked Norton if any other black female artist could be used to center the spirituality.

"I think that there are tons of artists, tons of black female artists that could do that," she said. "Beyoncé's story, her music, is the one that resonates with me the most. The thing that makes Beyoncé unique from, say, a Mary J. Blige or Cardi B is that if you ask most black people, they could tell you who Mary J. Blige and Cardi B are, but I was hard-pressed to find a person of any race, class, or gender, no matter where we are in the world, who doesn't know Beyoncé. Regardless of whether you listen to her music, you know who she is."

And even if you somehow don't know who Beyoncé is, the service is open to everyone, Norton said.

Yolanda Norton seeks to create a path that fits the theologies many unknowingly hold.

"I'm really clear that our goals are in developing the liturgy as the center of the story of black women," she said. "The one thing that keeps me going is when I look out [during the service], I see people of every race, every gender, and every age group represented. I had a woman who sent me a message on Facebook saying she was super excited to bring her 85-year-old mother to the Beyoncé Mass in D.C."

Norton thinks the Beyoncé Mass resonates with different groups because people are looking for a connection "as they live in a disconnected world."

"I think there is something about the mass that lets them be who they are," she said. "To find a different kind of joy. I think people in and out of church are alone, and sometimes there are people who are going to church who are really struggling,

and the church doesn't have the tools or resources to talk to them or make them feel less lost. And so, there is a question of how are we building community."

Norton said she's not trying to do anything other than create a path that fits the theologies many hold dear but don't really even know it.

"I think the human story of desire to connect with how we fit into God's plan for us is not something that is unique to church," she said. "I think we're all trying to make sense of that, and I think for a lot of people who have been hurt by the church that hurt is around someone or something in the church telling them they don't belong. So I try to have gender inclusive language in a way that is approximating to people in different gender identities, sexualities, races, because I think that is important [to] how we understand how God moves in the world, and is also central to womanist theology."

At the service at Spelman, several of Beyoncé's songs were sung by a "Beyoncé choir" made up of local singers and led by the Black Girl Magic Ensemble. This group of seven extraordinary voices was formed from African American choirs for an earlier Beyoncé Mass in Lisbon, Portugal. Now they travel with Norton. And, really, if you'd stumbled into the chapel and didn't realize you were at a service using Queen Bey's music, you would have thought the choir was singing regular gospel songs. You may have been moved by lyrics such as, "I'm in this fight, / And I'm swinging and my arms are getting tired. / I'm trying to beat this emptiness / But I'm running out of time. / I'm sinking in the sand, and I can barely stand" (from Beyoncé's "Scared of Lonely").

The people attending the service were—as Norton described at previous services—younger and older, black and white, male and female. They swayed back and forth and sang the lyrics posted on the giant screen.

When Norton spoke, she right away answered my lingering questions from my childhood worship experiences. "This is not your grandmother's church," she said to a cheering crowd. "This is not the frozen chosen."

"I remember seeing my grandfather come from church. He would always be frustrated because he said the preacher was preaching well, and then he preached too long—and then he went wrong," she went on. "So, I promise you, I'm not going to be in front of you very long."

And for about 20 minutes, Norton put on her preaching hat and Beyoncé disappeared.

Taking Ecclesiastes 4:1-12 as her text, Norton preached a sermon titled “We Gon’ Be Alright,” which might have resonated with some as a lyric from a popular Kendrick Lamar song.

She talked about the history of the book of Ecclesiastes, how scholars debated whether to include the text in the canon because it focuses so heavily on the nature of the human condition. “Because the material was contrary to their own ability to understand how people were to think around God, they could not make sense of how God operated in the text,” she said. “It has been fundamentally true across time that when people cannot make sense of your God walk, they tend to dismiss your God talk.”

People in the crowd said “amen” and “wow” and “that’s good” as Norton continued.

“When people don’t know your God walk, they will do everything in their power to disregard the capacity and power of your relationship with God. . . . If you don’t talk the way they want you to talk, you don’t dress like they want you to dress, if you don’t pray the way they see fit,” then they will view “your prayers and your dreams as something outside of God’s will. And so it was with the authors of this text.”

Norton told the crowd that she knows how it feels to be bullied and picked on. “It’s hard enough to make sense of God and operate in our lives when things are going well,” she said, “when you’re filled up, when your house is still standing and you have a roof over your head. But how do you make sense of God and live in this world when every minute of your reality has been turned upside down?”

And she looked out at the audience and told them she sees them and how wonderful and fierce they are—how they are their ancestor’s dreams. “You have to understand that because you are already the thing that God had in mind when she looked out over creation and said that we were good, that you don’t have to work yourself to the bone trying to prove that you are sufficient. Don’t let the world dictate to you how you move.”

After Norton’s sermon, Spelman students danced the electric slide to “Love on Top.”

“We live in a world that is not concerned about how long you make it,” she said, “and even if you make it. They aren’t concerned about how you’re doing. . . . But hold your head up high. Let go of your worries. It’s all up to God. Look at one another and see one another and be persistent in your love.”

And with that, the choir sang Beyoncé’s “Love on Top” and a group of mostly Spelman students went up front and danced the electric slide.

Jennings, the woman who attended after reading about the service in the newspaper, wasn’t disappointed. “I enjoyed it,” she said. “I enjoyed the sermon and how it related to what’s going on in the world today.”

Abigail McCann, an East Atlanta resident, also attended out of curiosity, after hearing about the service on social media. “I have a deep appreciation of what this mass is doing,” she said. “It was amazing. We had chills.”

Steve Sankey, a youth minister from Atlanta, said he and his wife were “blown away.”

“We were overwhelmed by how Beyoncé’s music made the service come to life and how the liturgy was incorporated,” he said.

Norton said afterward that she was pleased with the Spelman event. “It was a smaller crowd,” she said—it was a rainy Monday night—“but it was more energetic.”

She also addressed people’s curiosity about the name “Beyoncé Mass.” “It’s not about Beyoncé,” she said. “Her music is used to undergird the word.”

My own spirit is moved more by the traditional hymns that formed a foundation for my mother and my grandmother. But I recognize the importance of reaching others with newer approaches. And my 17-year-old daughter and I do dance and jump around to gospel songs with the sort of beat that my mother would not have allowed in her home. (One of our favorites goes, “I love God, you don’t love God? What’s wrong with you?” We make faces and everything.)

I think Norton’s concept can get people through the doors. And when it does, I suspect that her powerhouse voice and her sermon are what stick to their bones—whether they’re more likely to sing “Run the World (Girls)” or “Joy to the World.”

After Spelman, Norton took the Beyoncé Mass to Washington, D.C., to finish up the existing schedule. She has been in talks with others about additional services in other cities after the COVID-19 crisis.

Regarding the pandemic, Norton said she “hopes the church is entering a period where it acknowledges that it has to seek God in all things and not live in this kind of litigious paradigm of Christianity that excludes so many people.”

“We’ve just had this mass about beauty and community and how God works in community and how hard isolation is, and now we’re in this moment where so many people are feeling isolated,” she said. “We need to be intentional about community; so we’re trying to figure out how to reach people—trying to develop some digital notes and not be silent in this time where so many people need to hear more voices.”

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Not my grandmother’s church.”*