Documentary highlights the tensions, isolation of being 'Black + Evangelical'

by Adelle M. Banks
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A Promise Keepers event highlighted in the *Black + Evangelical* documentary. (Courtesy photo)

A new documentary is shedding light on a group of people who are part of the evangelical Christian tradition in a way, said Wheaton College theology professor Vincent Bacote, “that’s not just White and being a Republican.”

Black evangelicals, said Bacote, are too often unseen—the “orphan in our home faith community.” Over the last decade and a half, he has sought to remedy that by turning the history of Black evangelicals into a 90-minute documentary, *Black + Evangelical*. The film, produced in conjunction with his evangelical college and

Christianity Today, premiered at a February 21 screening on the school's Chicago suburban campus.

Bacote, 59, said he hopes the documentary will answer a question he's asked frequently since White evangelicals have become a force in conservative politics in the United States. "Did you know that the word 'evangelical' can mean something else than what you think it means if you read most of what's in the media today?"

Through two dozen interviews, historic photos, and archived recordings, the documentary traces the experiences of Black evangelicals and the challenges of maintaining a dual identity, one often misunderstood by people who share either their religion or their race.

"A Black evangelical is not a White evangelical in Black face," declares Walter McCray, president of the National Black Evangelical Association, in the film. "There's something very authentic and deeper. The most prominent Black evangelical in the Bible was Jesus."

The documentary notes that there are 900 million evangelicals across the globe and an estimated 90 million in the United States, spanning faith traditions, denominations and races.

Statistics vary about how many of these groups are Black, especially as some members have distanced themselves from the term in recent years. But a Pew Research Center report released February 26 found that 7 percent of US evangelicals identified themselves as Black, up one percentage point from findings in 2014 and 2007. Public Religion Research Institute found in a 2023 study that 41 percent of Black Christians identify as evangelical or born again and 59 percent do not.

The documentary traces the early influence of Black evangelicals to Berlin M. Nottage, who came to the US from the Bahamas with his two brothers in the early part of the 20th century and headed to northern cities to evangelize Black populations that had migrated there from the South.

"I had never been a part of a man's life and ministry that was so saturated with scripture as that man," William "Bill" Pannell, an emeritus professor at Fuller Theological Seminary who died in the fall, said in the film. "And the scriptures that he was particularly captivated by was that part of the word of God, that Pauline

tradition that Nottage used to tell Black people who they really were, that they were really somebody."

Some Black evangelicals grew up in traditional Black denominations and came into the evangelical movement through parachurch organizations such as the Navigators, Young Life, and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.

Stan Long, an executive vice president of Tom Skinner Associates, the Black-run evangelism and leadership training group, talked in an interview in the documentary about the sense of isolation felt by many Black evangelicals, some of whom met while working as the sole Black employees at predominantly White evangelical organizations.

"I think we mistakenly withdrew from our traditional Black churches, thinking that we had something better and later discovered that we didn't have anything better," he said. "We may have had something a little different but it wasn't better."

Despite the challenges—where their concerns went unheard and sometimes people refused to sit next to them—some felt a sense of calling to be the first and only Black staffers or leaders in predominantly White institutions.

"I went through some difficult times at Wheaton, on the board, trying to follow their lead," said Ruth Lewis Bentley, a co-founder of the National Black Evangelical Association and the first Black woman to serve on Wheaton's trustee board and the staff of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, in the documentary. "And maybe the Lord doesn't call everybody to help people in this respect. But I felt the Lord called me to be an instrument."

The turning point for many Black evangelicals was a rousing 1970 sermon by Skinner at the IVCF's triennial Urbana conference. "Any gospel that doesn't want to go where people are hungry, and people are poverty stricken and set them free in the name of Jesus Christ is not the gospel," he preached, drawing the interracial audience to its feet.

Both Bacote and historian Jemar Tisby, who is interviewed in the documentary, called it "an awakening moment," with Tisby saying it prompted White people in the audience to know "racial progress had to be part of what it meant to be a Christian in the United States."

But the cheers faded, as Black evangelicals were again dismissed. E. Brandt Gustavson, then-broadcasting director of the Moody Bible Institute's radio network, dropped Skinner for being "increasingly political" on his show. (Gustavson would later become the president of the National Religious Broadcasters.)

Bacote said in an interview that the arc of Skinner's story is one experienced by other Black evangelicals, from "Oh, hey, you're great, you're talented" to "Why are you getting political?"

He offered the Christian hip-hop artist Lecrae as a more recent example. "When he wrote (that) he wasn't sure about the term evangelical," Bacote recalled, "people were mad about him saying that. Well, this is not the first person to be thinking this."

In the 1990s, former University of Colorado coach Bill McCartney attempted to make his Promise Keepers movement a model of racial reconciliation, but his effort, too, soon became a point of criticism.

"What could have happened was those moments could have had a ripple effect to impact the institutions of evangelicalism," said Nicole Martin, COO of Christianity Today, in an interview near the end of the film. "What did happen was an understanding of the cost and, from my vantage point, an unwillingness to pay that cost."

The documentary's premiere, attended by about 275 students, community members, and people featured in the film, was preceded earlier in the month by a webinar co-hosted by the National Association of Evangelicals, which in recent years has hosted spiritual retreats for leaders of color and is planning a third one in the fall.

"This retreat has been a great support for people of color who are serving in predominantly white spaces," Mekdes Haddis, project director for the NAE's Racial Justice and Reconciliation Collaborative, said in an email. "Many have been leading racial reconciliation and justice efforts, without a lot of support."

The premiere of the documentary, which Bacote had long planned for Black History Month, took place as Wheaton was dealing with backlash for its congratulatory message for alumnus and White House official Russell Vought that drew competing letters from alumni about its politics.

One letter accused the college of upholding a “DEI regime.” However, Bacote said he had not received pushback about the screening.

Instead, he has received requests for additional screenings and plans to post the documentary online by April.

At the end of the documentary, Bacote concludes there are more people than he realized living out the tensions of being Black and evangelical. “Too often I thought I was standing at these crossroads by myself,” he said. “But over the years I have discovered I am far from alone.” —Religion News Service