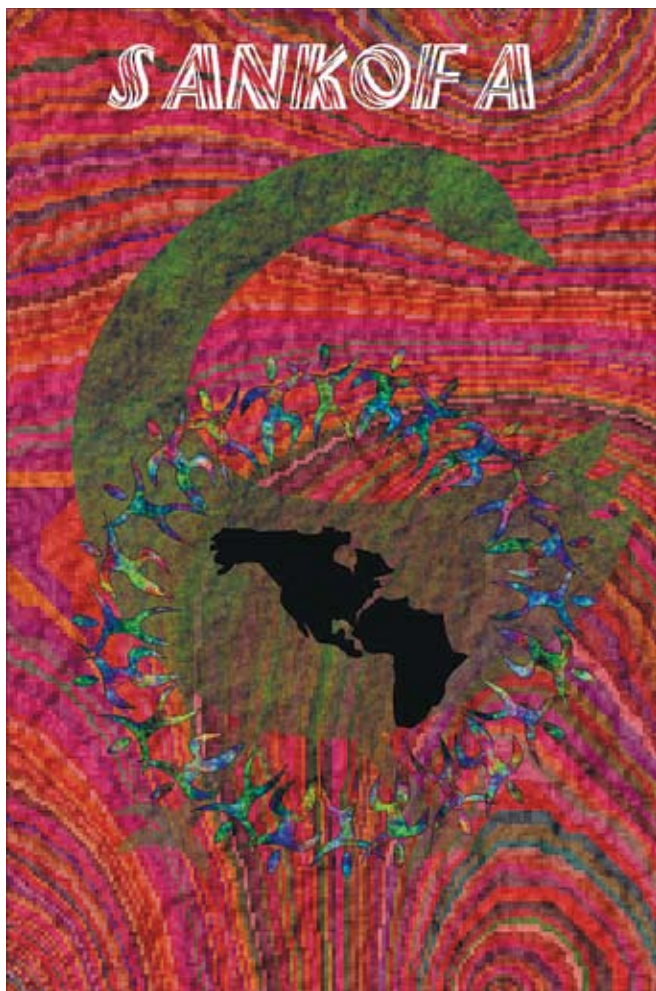


SANKOFA PAPER #1

*The Sacred World of Black Folks:
A Journey in African-American Spirituality*



Dr. Eugene Blair and Rev. Glandion Carney

The Showers Lectures for 2005
Inaugural Gathering of the African-American Sages
The University of Indianapolis

The invitation to speak at the 2005 Showers Lectures at the University of Indianapolis was pivotal point in the journey to create a new, diverse, ecumenical, and cross-racial community committed to African-American spirituality. A group of us had been gathering for about a year to pray about and discuss a new experiment in spirituality grounded in the African-American religious tradition. The Showers Lectures moved us to higher level of discernment and understanding about the very nature of the subject we wanted to pursue: spirituality.

For lack of a better title, we named ourselves “A Task Force on African-American Spirituality.” Led by the University of Indianapolis and the Upper Room Ministries of the United Methodist Church, we began to forge an idea that African-American spirituality could be the foundation on which anyone and everyone could draw closer to God and each other. Our written manifesto is as follows:

God is calling forth a community of believers who long for the wisdom of African-American spirituality. This spirituality is hewn from the rock of African spirituality, values, and disciplines as well as the slave religions and traditions that have evolved into the Black church community we know today. This community is covenantal in nature and intentional in the practice of worship, study, prayer, reflection, and service. It is ecumenical in scope and invitation. This community is intensive and reflective in its relational life with God and all people. We believe that this spirituality is a threshold into wider Christian traditions of spirituality. We invite you to come and journey with us and explore the “sacred world of Black folks,” the people who have traveled this road to know God.

The theme for our work has been what West Africans call *sankofa*. One translation of *sankofa* is: “***We must go back and reclaim our past so we can move forward; so we can understand how and why we came to be who we are.***”

The word “*sankofa*” comes from the Akan, an ancient nation of people in the West African nation of Ghana. They believe the search for knowledge is a lifelong process and journey of learning. The Akan believe that anyone can become knowledgeable if they are teachable. They regard the elderly as wise and believe that experience comes with age. Age and experience are to be revered and honored. This association of wisdom with age is incorporated in the *sankofa* symbol.

The mythical *sankofa* bird is a symbol of wisdom, knowledge, and the people’s heritage. The word is derived from the words *san* (return), *ko* (go), and *fa* (look, seek, and take). The bird flying forward with its head looking backward symbolizes the Akan’s quest for knowledge, with the implication that the quest is based on critical examination and intelligent investigation. This also reflects the Akan belief that the past serves as a guide for planning

one's future. Wisdom gained from the past is clearly a foundation for the future. Certainly time and people move forward. But one must not ignore the gems to be picked up from behind to be carried into the future.

Our vision is for a community of believers committed to this practice as described. Our vision is a two-year learning experience: a short-term residential learning experience, a pilgrimage to the south to travel the Civil Rights trail and visit the places where history was made and lives were lost and changed, a pilgrimage to west Africa to see the slave markets and trails of tears left by those loaded onto ships for the journey into slavery, and a gathering of African and African-American sages and teachers who can teach, mentor, and guide others with their wisdom, experience, and learning. The Showers Lectures afforded us the opportunity to launch this last part of our vision. The first Gathering of the African-American Sages was held as a part of the 2005 Showers Lectures.

We are indebted to the University of Indianapolis for this invitation. We appreciate the work of Dr. Michael Cartwright and his staff to steer our hope and dream into reality. The Gathering of the African-American Sages will continue as an integral part of the University's work and ministry in ecumenical, interfaith, and cultural affairs. We are also grateful to Ms. Elizabeth Freeman, who designed the special sankofa banner unveiled at the 2005 Showers Lectures, for granting permission for us to use her banner design on the cover of this initial set of Sankofa Papers.

Finally, we are grateful to Upper Room Ministries and the General Board of Discipleship for the roles that these agencies and their respective staffs have played in helping the inaugural gathering of the African-American Sages at the University to be a success, and we look forward to partnering with the congregations of Greenwood United Methodist Church (Greenwood, Ind.) and Barnes United Methodist Church (Indianapolis, Ind.) that will serve as hosts for the next set of Gatherings of the Sages.

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INTRODUCTION

AFRICAN-AMERICAN SPIRITUALITY— THE DREAMS OF BLACK FOLKS

To some, it may seem naive and irrelevant to ask questions about spirituality at a time like this. Spirituality for many, black or white, has no place or meaning in our modern technological scheme of life. In our times, Internet connectivity is more vital to Americans than being connected to each other. Our lives are full of economic woes, the war with Iraq, a Congress that wants to continue to dismantle hard-won programs for children, and a community full of hopelessness. Yet, a renewal and reclaiming of spirituality is precisely what is needed “for such a time as this” (Esther). While this generation shuns organized and institutional religion, there is a deep and abiding search for spirituality. Someone said that in essence everything humans do in this life is ultimately a search to know God.

To speak of the distinctive spirituality of African-American people is to speak of what W. E. B. DuBois called “the souls of Black folks.” The care and nurture of the souls of Black folks is spiritual in nature, practice, and theology. To care for their souls, Black folks must care for their dreams. It is the care and nurture of their dreams that Black folks often speak about in music, sermons, folk tales, street graffiti, prison songs, stories, and poetry. African-American poet Langston Hughes spoke to these dreams of Black folks when he wrote:

Bring me all your dreams, you dreamers.
Bring me all your heart melodies
That I may wrap them in a blue cloud cloth
Away from the too rough fingers of the world.¹

To speak of dreams is to recall the special spirituality, the historic mission, and the compelling commitment that African-Americans have always had to justice and freedom. For African-Americans, the search for God is essentially a search for liberation and freedom. Every generation of Black folks in America and their leaders have struggled against overwhelming odds to transform the conditions of life under which we exist. This transformation is rooted in the belief that the spirit of God is at work in the life of the world community, church, and each believer. So we speak of dreams because dreams are vital to our hope, survival, and spirituality.

We turn to the issue of dreams perhaps because we are preoccupied with everyday survival to spend time with our dreams. We are overwhelmed by hopelessness, lovelessness, and despair. Our sense of urgency and zeal for the larger vision of the Kingdom of God has been replaced with complacency. Perhaps we have settled out of court with America. Our zealous fire has been banked as we have been lulled into a culture that is deficient in the values of spirituality—a culture that longs for community and belonging, yet one that is confused about raising families, solving problems, and living with hope. Dreaming seems impossible, but dream we must.

Over the last four hundred years and more, African-Americans have expressed our frustration and despair in civil disobedience, belligerent

actions, and harsh and angry words. Words written by DuBois at the turn of the century in 1903 describe our experience:

Storm and stress today rocks our little boat on the mad waters of the sea world; there is within and without the sound of conflict, the burning of body and the rending of soul; inspiration strives with doubt, and faith with vain questionings. The bright ideals of the past, physical freedom, political power, the training of minds and the training of hands, all these in turn have waxed and waned until even the last grows dim and overcast. Are they all wrong, all false?²

The “storms and stress” DuBois described so clearly in 1903 came to life more than ever in 1963. More than two hundred thousand people gathered in Washington, D.C. at the Lincoln Memorial that August. It was a rainbow of people, colors, races, and creeds. Many of us were only in elementary school at that time. We felt and experienced the excitement, enthrallment, and lure of the dream that beckoned us. Martin Luther King, Jr. painted a marvelous spiritual word-picture of our hopes and charted the course to make our dream a reality:

“I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”³

Hearing King, we believed that the day was near when we would be free at last. King’s words were the essence of the dream and we were enthralled by that dream. But suddenly it was over as fast as it had begun. It seemed that the heroes and heroines of the fight, those who dared to lead us and to believe that dream and who lifted our hopes and vision, stirred and ennobled our hearts, were killed. We watched it again and again on our television sets: King in Memphis, Robert Kennedy in Los Angeles, John Kennedy in Dallas, Malcolm X in Chicago. Others were killed in city after city, some famous, most unknown. The Black radicals were imprisoned or living in exile, the Black power movement ground to a halt, and it seemed that nothing had changed.

The madness of those days invaded a Black Baptist church in Alabama where six little Black girls, who came to hear the stories of Jesus in Sunday school, were killed when a bomb exploded. Southern states such as Mississippi became killing fields and cities like Detroit and Chicago became burning infernos of anger and frustration. Surely, the “mad waters of the sea world” would swamp our little boat of life.

Many are convinced that racist America will forever defeat the reality of the dreams of Black folks. We have to be reminded that we must “hold fast to dreams.” We speak of dreams because Black folks have seen such little change in the climate of life in America. The kingdom of God embodied in Jesus of Nazareth seems further away than ever. The hard-fought gains of yesterday seem to have been lost.

But we cannot and do not stake our dreams only in what is today. As Africans, we know that we live in the present with history behind us, our ancestors above us and our children in front of us. This generation has seen the historic events of liberation around the world. There is a rekindled hope for freedom and that the disenfranchised Blacks of America will one day fully taste and fully see liberty.

In all of this, we must keep a historical perspective. Surely some lessons have been learned as a nation and as African-Americans. We are a nation of people with leaders who have yet to learn the lesson of a godly humility. We are not willing to scrutinize ourselves as a people. We refuse to critically examine ourselves against the backdrop of the world community. Perhaps the modern-day war with Iraqi is the most telling notion of our national arrogance.

We have heroic energy and ideals, but a selfish nation-serving purpose. We have yet to garner our cultural, political, economic, and spiritual resources for the global community.

A Call for Spirituality

In a word, we need a new experiment in spirituality. This is the dream of Black folks. Surely those of us in the Black church understand the importance of dreams! The Black church has a remarkable tradition and history of spirituality and dreams. It was the Black church that taught Black folk “You are somebody.” The Black church gave us confidence that some day God’s holy will would be done “by and by.” The Black church took our small resources and built schools and colleges, supported businesses, built a political base, cared for our poor, organized social services agencies, and buried our fathers and mothers in segregated graveyards. The Black church dared to believe in the possibilities and power of Black folk against every barrier any society could erect.

We need spiritual encouragement to dream again. If we in the church, black or white, have forgotten how to dream, we must be reminded and encouraged to live in a spirituality that is anchored the Kingdom of God. By dreaming, we mean a return to the values, disciplines, and ethos that shaped and molded us as a people and brought us “thus far on the way.”

We are convinced that Black folks still share a dream today, a dream that has never changed. There is a common ground for a dream of freedom with justice. It is the compelling, irresistible hope that some day in this land we can be both an African and an American. At the turn of the century, DuBois called this state of existence a “double-consciousness” and saw it as strife and a burden to be borne.

It is a peculiar sensation, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others. One ever feels his two-ness. An American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge the double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much

to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.⁴

Dreams may never be enough, but they are the place to begin even in this moment of crisis in our history, even when life may be foreboding with distress, doubt, and the reversal of hard-won gains. As we move through this millennium, did much change between 1903 and 1963? What was different in 2003 or what will be different in 2063? How will we care for the souls of Black folks? Dr. King reminds us of the need to keep the Kingdom of God foremost in the midst of all of our struggling:

In a real sense this is a great time to be alive. I am not yet discouraged about the future. Granted, the easy-going optimism of yesterday is impossible. Granted, we face a world crisis, which leaves us standing so often amid the surging murmur of life's restless sea. But even crisis has both its dangers and opportunities. It can spell either salvation or doom. In a dark, confused world the kingdom of God may yet reign in the hearts of men.⁵

PART 1

The Sacred World

SANKOFA: *an African word that means, "We must go back and reclaim our past so that we can move forward . . . so we can understand why and how we came to be who we are today."*

Much has been written and documented about the religious journey of African-Americans, particularly music, preaching, and worship. Our theme is specifically about the spiritual formation of the American-American church and community and how this spirituality is worked out in practice. The "working out" of this spirituality is based on a specific African-based world view and understanding of God. This spirituality is a gift we offer to the larger community of those who seek a closer walk with God.

Why should we talk about an African-American spirituality, and what is so different about the way Black folks "do" spirituality? Lawrence W. Levine, in his book *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, places our religious experience historically in what he calls the "sacred world" of Black Americans. Levine contends that Black folks have stayed sane in this society by "entering fully into the sacred world of one's own peers with its comforting precedents and promises, its strategies and alternative sources of power."⁶

This sacred world is the place where one can find our core spiritual beliefs at work. It is the world of the preacher, teacher, junkie and dealer, the corner store, the barbershop, fraternities and sororities, and gangs anywhere in Black America. In the sacred world, there is no separation of the secular and the sacred. I read somewhere that nothing is so secular that it cannot be sacred. These two spheres of life exist side by side. Therefore, the care of the souls of Black folks calls for a spirituality that is holistic, a balancing of these two. The task of the African-American church is to be the spiritual guide of this balance.

African-American Spirituality—The Gift We Share

The opportunities to give and receive gifts from one another should be accompanied by feelings of joy, gratitude, and appreciation. But often giving and receiving gifts is difficult in our culture. The task is burdened with extrinsic cultural, and economic realities that can diminish or elevate the entire act.

To give a gift in African culture is to bestow upon the recipient a token of intrinsic value. For example, in many African cultures, the giving of an egg is to bestow upon another the hope for health and a good life. By giving this small gift, the giver believes the gift has value for them and therefore believes the gift will add value to the recipient's life. The receiving of a gift has as much value as the giving.

African-Americans have an opportunity to offer a unique gift to this culture: the unique gift of spirituality. We will not allow others to diminish the greatness of our gift because we are people of color and our spirituality and religions are based and immersed in Africa. We believe that America is searching for God. We believe the gift of our distinctive spirituality will enhance that universal search to know God and draw us closer to one another by adding value and meaning.

African-American spirituality is based and rooted in Africa, slave religion, and the slave church. In our time, the Black church expressions and religions in America are the foundational expression of this spirituality. The traditional Black church is not African or European. It is a third entity hewn from the rock of suffering, genocide, and a resolute spirit that proclaims "God is." Our task is to understand, reclaim, and define this spirituality for the contemporary Black church and community and the general church.

In other words, African-American spirituality is a set of twins. One twin is the need to reclaim our African roots, tradition, culture, and rituals in a meaningful and vibrant way. The second twin is to use our Africanisms to cultivate, develop, and guide black folks on this journey.

African-American Spirituality—A Definition

It is common practice throughout church history to describe the spiritual life within the context of a particular historical period, a single religious person, or theological tradition, as well as culturally, ethnically, or racially. Spirituality often has a founder and teacher. Disciples followed certain teachings and those teachings became institutionalized for later generations.

The founder of Christian spirituality is Jesus Christ of Nazareth. This spirituality can be defined as "the style of a person's responses to Christ, before the challenge of life, in a given historical and cultural environment."⁷

While the essence of spirituality is to encounter the Divine, there are particularities in that search. African-American spirituality is one such particularity.

Too often the terms African-American religion and African-American spirituality are used interchangeably. While religion refers to an institutionalized process, spirituality refers to a change of heart and spirit. They are both informed by Black theology and one cannot exist without the other. Yet they are not one and the same.

Such a particularity as African-American spiritual formation needs to be carefully defined. Spiritual (*to breathe*) formation (*to form, reflect the image of*) in the Christian context is the work of the Holy Spirit to form our lives. The goal is to make us into saints, into the image of Jesus Christ. The New Testament spells out what that image is and how to obtain such an image. While there are many different spiritualities in the African-American community, we are discussing Christian spirituality. Therefore, what is African-American Christian spirituality?

African-American spirituality is Africa-based; it is the way we care for the souls of Black folks in the sacred world we created through a collection of distinctive and vital characteristics, practices, disciplines, and values. All of this has been forged in the crucible of the lives of Black folks with its attendant racism, oppression, and suffering. It is our response to the grace of God.

In the context of the Christian community, African-American spirituality is the way in which Black folks understand the God of their lives and what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. It is a distinctive and vital spirituality forged in the crucible of the Black life with its historical slavery and the attendant racism and suffering. The common spirit and thread running through the various Black and African-American spiritualities is that God has the last word; it is an attitude of life and prayer that sees all of life as an encounter with a grace-filled, compassionate, and forgiving God.

African-American Spirituality: Spirituality as a Foundational Value in Our Sacred World

When spider webs join together, they can tie up a lion.

—Ethiopian proverb

While every culture has implicit and explicit values, not every culture would agree on a set of values or a single definition. Often we confuse values with beliefs, theology, or statements of faith. For our purposes, values are consistent, passionate, and distinctive convictions that determine who we are and what we want to become. Values determine our priorities and influence our decisions. Values drive our lives and are lived out in our relationships in everyday actions and behaviors.

What do cultures and peoples do with values? Values are the foundational roots out of which we formulate goals and directions that last a lifetime. Many of us are not as successful as we would like to be in life, work, and ministry because we have not determined our key values. For African-Americans, spirituality is that bedrock and key value.

Are there specific American or African values? In our American culture, too often, that which is specific and particular is rejected by the majority as insignificant. We judge the value of gifts by our relationship to the bearer. It may be difficult for others to accept our gift of African and African-American spirituality because we are people of color. Yet, because close to two-thirds of the world's people are black and brown, we can have a significant impact on the spiritual lives of others if they are willing to learn and receive from us.

Instead of dismissing the gift as something they do not need, others might do well to learn from us. We offer six specific spiritual values to our brothers and sisters of every hue and invite them to journey with us to knowing and loving God and each other in a new way. These values are the life qualities that form the cloth and fabric of our African-American spirituality.

1. Learning from the past

The Adinkra (West Africa, Ghana) symbol for sankofa means “return to get it.” It has been translated various ways. Simply put, it means one must learn from the past in order to move into the future. African-Americans must return to Africa and learn about themselves and their past. This is symbol is depicted by the sankofa bird of Ghana with its head turned backward. The bird symbolizes the need to look back to the past in order to go forward.

For African-Americans, the journey must necessarily include a trip through the slave history and civil rights struggle. This helps to explain the obsession African-Americans have with tracing their heritage and roots back to Africa. Spiritual formation in the African-American community takes place when we experience and understand sankofa.

There are numerous translations of sankofa. One enlightening translation for Black folks is, “No matter how far one goes, one must always return home.”

2. Celebration and joy

Joy is God's gift to human kind. Celebration is our acceptance of the gift. Joy and celebration are not ancillary entertainment or byproducts of our culture. They are functional and at the core of everyday life. They have to do with work, play, life and death, suffering and despair. This attitude came with us from Africa. Slavery and racism did not destroy this life-rooted rhythm. It transformed it. Slaves and former slaves danced and sang with a new song in a strange land. They created new steps, songs, music, and sounds in response to the oppression and pain. We keep on today, in the words of Maya Angelou, “loving life and daring to live it.”

We were created with the ability to sing, dance, celebrate, and give thanks. This gift, this value of joy is the hallmark of the sacred world of Black folks. At the very heart of joy are the rituals of celebration. It is joy and celebration that sustain African-Americans on this journey in a sometimes hostile and wilderness environment. African-American spirituality is a disciplined spirituality of joy and celebration. We hold up the worshiping community, our sacred world, our experience, and our reality.

3. Except for God

God is supreme in life. The question is not, “Is there a God?” The value is simply, “God is.” The Adinkra symbol for the words *gye nyame* means “except for God.” In all things God is supreme.

This unique and beautiful symbol is ubiquitous in Ghana. It is by far the most popular for use in decoration, a reflection on the deeply religious character of the Ghanaian people. God is everywhere. Spiritual formation in the African-American church takes place when we are enabled to go beyond our human limitations and create a sacred space and climate for Black people and others to encounter God and make sense out of life and existence. Spiritual formation in the African-American community takes place when the African-American church understands that we live in God’s universe. The center of this universe is the heart of God with its natural healing force and divine power.

4. Covered in prayer

Our spirituality is a spirituality of prayer. As we pray for ourselves, one another, and the human condition, we find a corporate and personal balance in our life and ministry. This balance is maintained through acts of intercession and encouragement, worship and praise, fellowship and community, and healthy maintenance of the mind, body, and spirit.

Finding this balance is the call to nurture and care for the souls of Black folks. This, in a word, is African-American spirituality. It is not African spirituality, nor is it American spirituality. It is a third entity rooted in Africa and the African-American church and it is informed by the nature and practice of Black theology. These form the sacred world of Black folks and the Black church, where its values, disciplines, gifts, and ministry are kept and nurtured as means of grace.

Who can forget the images of Martin Luther King, Jr. praying in churches before going out to face the real life of racism in Alabama. The movement of liberation in American was born in the prayers of the church as uttered from the mouths of God’s people.

5. The world is a community and global village

In traditional African culture, the “I” has meaning only within the “we” of the community. Individuals find meaning and identity within the context of the community and by taking part in the life of that community. The heart of the human community is the family. The Black church, family, and community are an eminent social reality.

In African-American spirituality, the family and community play the central role in the formation of people. The family is a major channel for fostering and learning spiritual values. Slaves brought an understanding of the extended family with them from Africa. This extended family system is what saved blacks from further disintegration amidst the harsh realities of slave life and the history that was to follow. The rich notion of the extended family was not only a part of the African context and slave context. It is now an important part of the African-American experience.

Community is the human place that offers sacred space to everyone so they use the God-given gifts the creator has bestowed upon them. Everyone has something to offer for the good of others.

In African societies, religion and culture are one as a clear and distinctive value. It does not matter whether one is a Christian or Muslim or follows traditional African religions. Harvesting and planting are religious. Friendship is religious. Work is religious. Funerals, weddings, and being a good host for visitors and family, raising children, rites of passage, and honoring the elders are all both cultural and religious. For African-Americans, we can see how Christian traditions and values have affected this culture. We do not say “Discard culture and retreat.” We say “Take Christianity to the culture and change it with our message and values.”

6. The cycle of life and creation are one

All of life in the universe is a circle and, as such, community is central. The “I” belongs to the “we.” No one stands alone. Birth, puberty, adulthood, marriage, and death are a part of the circle of life. There is no beginning or end. With our ancestors above us and the unborn in front of us, we represent the here and now. All cultures in some way experience this circle. But nowhere is this circle so clearly related to religion and culture than in Africa. Kwanzaa is our dedicated effort to reclaim this important value for ourselves and our children.

Our concern for land and Black farmers is an important expression of this value. Unfortunately, Blacks have tried so very hard to get away from the notion of land and working the land. For us the land represents so much of the evil and violence of the past. Slavery was working the land and enriching an entire culture on the backs and lives of African men, women, and children. Sharecropping and Jim Crow indentured slavery drove Blacks from the land. Yet, in the land there is life and God. We must hold to and reclaim land, creation, and life for our own sake.

African-American Spirituality: Means of Grace

It is a holy obsession for African Americans to trace their history, religion, family ties, and spirituality back to Africa. Africans have a highly developed sense of God. Deeply rooted in their collective experience is the innate sense of and an ongoing experiential relationship with the Creator. Hence, African-Americans relate to the God who is beyond human definition, yet in everyday human affairs, a caring Creator who listens to and hears the cries of joy, distress, sorrow, and celebration.

Because of this experience of God, we are a grace-filled people, saved by God’s amazing love and sacrifice of a Savior. Moreover, we are not just saved. God has granted the means of grace; that is, the means to grow and mature in faith. The means of grace are those characteristics, values, and practices that show us the way to live and how to exist as human beings, created just a little lower than the angels.

Traditionally, the church has taught that the means of grace are those established and agreed-upon sacramental moments and experiences—communion, baptism, ordination, marriage, classic spiritual disciplines, etc. But

we believe that spirituality itself is a means of grace, a way of receiving God's presence and blessing. Particularly, we believe that African-American spirituality, with its unique quest to know and experience God, can be a means of grace, a gift, for the entire church.

We wish to share our African-American spirituality with the whole church as a means of grace because we believe our spirituality will lead others beyond their boundaries, experiences, and life story to something new and deeper. This gift of spirituality can give meaning and depth to our relationships to God and one another in communities, the nation, and the world. We must share it with the world because we have something to teach the world. As means of grace, this spirituality is a rich source of nurture and spiritual direction for us as individuals, the church, and community. It grows out of an active faith in God and as such is our moral response to live life on God's terms, to be willing to have our spirits directed by the Spirit.

PART TWO

Spiritual Practices of the Sacred World

We have natural ties with Africa, and as such, we are Africa's progeny in the Americas. We were torn from our roots by the slave trade while the cradle of civilization was divided up by colonial powers. Neither Africa nor her children would ever be the same. Our holocaust begins with the Middle Passage, a journey of death for thousands of Africans on slave ships who never made it from Africa's shores to the Americas. Our holocaust is the brutality of American slavery, Jim Crow politics, and the destruction of the African's family, social structure, and religions.

In spite of the brutality of our human experience, African-Americans forged a spirituality of hope and grace. It is the courageous human spirit of African-Americans when they look life in the face and not allow sorrow and suffering to have the last word.

Our human experience birthed a unique set of spiritual practices in our religious experience. The result of our holocaust is a spirituality formed from a distinctive fabric sewn together by a disciplined life of prayer that leads us to continually encourage one another, to understand our suffering as redemptive suffering, hearing and obeying the call for reconciliation, seeking justice and righteousness, and holy servanthood. These are the values of African-American spirituality. We offer this spirituality as a gift to the church because we believe that the church and God's people can be better formed into the image of Christ and bring the kingdom of God to earth as it is in heaven.

1. Discipline

Central to any spirituality is discipline. The term has been used in various ways. Discipline means any training that leads to a specific end or produces obedience, self-control, or a specific skill. In spirituality, that end result is a life transformed by the Spirit into the image of Jesus Christ. Many speak of classical or historical spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Christian conference,

fasting, and meditation. As such, disciplines are means of grace that form us into Christ's image.

The use of the term "discipline" must be expanded to see how African-Americans, in response to their peculiar history and story, have formed a specific spirituality. Discipline includes those areas of African-American life that have shaped and continue to shape our religious experience. Rather than "discipline," one might say "channels of spiritual formation"—passageways we travel and have traveled to make connections between our experiences in this life with the God above.

2. Contemplation (prayer)

African-American spirituality is contemplative. It calls for a disciplined life of prayer. It has been said that the three major support systems in the African-American church are music, preaching, and prayer. It is difficult to say which is more important, but certainly prayer is paramount. In our sacred world, prayer is the thread that holds the fabric of our lives together. It is our life source and link with the life-giving God. Prayer upholds our spirituality and desire for a life shaped in the image of Jesus Christ. We are called to an interior journey that leads to outer growth and change. Through prayer, we are called to have significant relationships with believers and those who do not believe in the community and the world. We grow and mature in faith when we pray about our relationship to others, all of creation, and the kingdom of God.

This rich spiritual discipline goes beyond the traditional understanding of the term "contemplative." It goes beyond the notion that contemplative prayer is only inward, individual, and solitary. By this we mean that prayer is pervasive and spontaneous in the African-American tradition. Because God is omnipotent—that is, always acting everywhere—and because God is omniscient—that is, God knows everything—every place is a place of prayer.

3. Encouragement

African-Americans experience encouragement as a spiritual quality of life. To give courage to another has a great deal to do with one's spirituality. Encouragement is the kind of expression and reaching out to others that helps someone want to a better Christian and human being even when life is rough. It says, "by the power, presence, and grace of God, we can have a powerful effect on each other." We must apply our spiritual and mental energies to the job of understanding precisely how we can perform this important task and work for each other. Giving courage to one another is a blessed act.

Any discussion of African-American spirituality must explore how the human spirit perseveres. Perseverance is one of the core beliefs of Black folks that issues from our understanding of how God works in the lives of people. It is a Biblical perspective, shedding light on our Black human religious experience. We offer the gift of an encouraging community of believers to the church at large.

4. Servanthood and Service

Jesus Christ calls us to servanthood. In the sacred world, service is the hallmark of the mature Christian. The person being spiritually formed into the

image of Jesus Christ is one who lives a life of a servant in accord with the portrait given to us of Jesus Christ in the gospels. Deliberate and intentional acts of love, charity, healing, and compassion are acts of servanthood.

To be formed in the image of Christ calls us to live not for self alone, but for others. The call of servanthood and mature spirituality is to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, clothe the naked, give alms to the poor, and care for the sick. This was Jesus' example of self-giving love. This is the historical and biblical role of the African-American church.

We can never forget the media images of those who fought for freedom and justice first kneeling in prayer and worship before facing the people and obstacles that stood in the way of right. The hymn writer said, "I am on the battlefield for my Lord, and I promised Him that I would serve Him till I die." No one who follows Jesus can sit back and let wrong and evil have the last word.

5. Suffering

In African-American spirituality, we must redefine the place and role of suffering. In our culture, no one wants to suffer for any reason. Our culture is built on the premise that all suffering is to be avoided at all costs.

First, in the sacred world of Black folks, suffering is not for the sake of the sufferer. Those who suffer are redeemed by the Master and suffer because Jesus suffered. There is redemption and holy power in knowing that one follows in the footsteps of the Master who knew suffering and death for the sake of others. Black folks know that, by and by, God's people will be redeemed and blessed in spite of their suffering.

Secondly, how is the nature of the spirit discerned and responded to in the context of the struggles of Black folks? The great diversity in the Black religious experience is both unintentional and the work of a higher power. The common spiritual thread running through the life of the Black church and community is the experience of the suffering wrought by slavery and a unified spiritual response to racism, hostility, and hatred. These harsh realities have defined much of the nature of the spirituality of the Black church.

Finally, the compelling dynamic in African-American spirituality is the call to lead Black people to an understanding of God's will and power. The suffering and life struggle of Black people—and what God is doing about it—is the central focus of the African-American church. It is centered in God's work toward Black justice and freedom and commitment to the total life of Black people. African-American spirituality is kingdom-of-God spirituality. It is moved by the notion that all persons can be motivated by the spirit of Jesus to have concern for the here and now as well as what will come by and by. This is the sacred world of Black folks.

6. Reconciliation

Another important value of the sacred world has to do with the relationship of African-Americans to their oppressors. That is the ministry of the reconciliation of all God's people. In the sacred world of the slave, and now the sacred world of African-Americans, there is a perpetual message that calls for

forgiveness. It is a message of hope that liberates us from hatred and malice. Reconciliation at any level of human relationship is a deeply spiritual matter. How much more severe the issue becomes when one considers the depth of suffering of Black folks in America. Reconciliation is more than a mere shaking of hands and pleasantries. It is a deeply rooted work of the Holy Spirit.

7. Justice and Righteousness

The call for justice and righteousness is a call to action on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves. In our sacred world, this is a quality of character and one's life. The Bible is a story of God and holy people taking the side of the poor, the widows, children, and the powerless. These are divine qualities of a God who created the world and called it good. These are qualities of African-American spirituality, too.

8. The Use of Scripture

African-Americans interpret Scripture in light of their unique and specific experience of slavery. They have known slavery as brutally as the suffering Israelites way down in Egypt land. This experience dates to 1619, when the first Africans arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, and were forced into a system of servitude.

The irony of their slavery is that their captors were Christians who read and believed the Christian Bible. The Africans took serious notice of how much power the Bible had in the lives of their captors. The slaves sought encouragement from the Bible because they saw it as a life source of power. The Bible became a body of literature that contained more than just stories about slavery and liberation. It became the place where the slaves heard their own cries for freedom and justice.

As the slaves became more and more aware of the stories of the Bible, they began to interpret their own experiences in light of those who suffered in the Bible. The slaves' own real-life experience led them to engage the Scriptures for their own spiritual formation. For slaves, former slaves, and now African-Americans, the events of the biblical world are alive in their present-day circumstances. God can deliver the righteous from evil and bondage.

The Bible, holy scriptures, are more than ancient texts that reveal how God has related to people in the past and makes promises for the future. Black folks use Scripture in poetry, music, songs, sermons, and everyday life to keep hope alive. To keep the promises of God ever before us in the midst of suffering is a grueling task. Black folks employ the language, images, promises, and hope of Scripture to make this happen.

Scripture has always played a central role in the lives of African-Americans. The use of Scripture involves not only the interpretation of biblical texts, but also the experience of the people. We have always been a people of the Book. The interpretation of Scripture involves the interpreter's view of reality.

Too often the church in America has been a mutually benefiting partner in the subjugation of Africans and African-Americans. The use of Scripture was a key ingredient to giving power and authority to this subjugation. For example, European-Americans used Ephesians 6:5 (*Slaves, obey your masters*

with fear and trembling) to support the institution and practice of chattel slavery. African American slaves turned to Colossians 3:11 (*There is no longer . . . slave and free, but Christ is all and in all*) to find strength to claim their liberation. The same author and pastor, Paul, wrote both. The difference is how one employs and uses the texts.

9. Music, Worship and Preaching

The primary focus of our worship is to praise God. Yet many needs come together in the African-American worship experience in terms of spiritual formation. There is the need for a positive self-image, dignity, and worth. There is the need for the community and individuals to feel whole again in terms of mind, body, and spirit, as well as in their relationships to each other and God. This is most important in the midst of degradation, oppression, and suffering. There is the need for affirmation as God's people. Most importantly, there is the need to praise and give thanks to the God who has loved and sustained us through all of the ordeals of life.

10. The Place of Remembering: Ritual, Storytelling, and Griots

The phenomenon of ritual is the ultimate expression of the African worldview. Through ritual, culture, religion, nature, and the universe are understood as a whole. The health of a nation, a people, or a family depends on roots, rituals, and traditions. Without such, people wander aimlessly through their existence.

Africans are a ritualistic people. Rituals and ceremonies are processes of remembering. The *griots* are our storytellers and custodians of memory. When we ritualize life, we are learning how to invoke the spirit and things spiritual into the common and everyday. Ritual is life drama. Rituals keep before us the need to recognize and honor the sacrifice and work of previous generations.

PART THREE

Keeping the Rule—A Sankofa Community

About two years ago, a small group of people got together to discuss what it would be like to create a religious order or a community of people who were dedicated to African-American spirituality and living out the values and spiritual practices set forth on these pages. Our idea was to create a model of a spiritual community of believers much like religious orders that follow a rule. Our dream is a cross section of people making and keeping a covenant to walk the spiritual walk of Christ. Here is our vision statement:

God is calling forth a community of believers who long for the wisdom of African-American spirituality. This spirituality is hewn from the rock of African spirituality, values, and disciplines as well as the slave religions and traditions that have evolved into the Black church community today. This community is covenantal in nature and intentional in the practice

of worship, study, prayer, reflection and service. It is ecumenical in scope and invitation. This community is intensive and reflective in its relational life with God and all people.

We believe that this spirituality is a threshold into wider Christian traditions of spirituality. We invite you to come and journey with us and explore the “sacred world of Black folks,” the people who have traveled this road to know God.

We want to be an inclusive community of African-American believers and others who have decided to know God and love each other deeper. We are not experts in spiritual matters. But we are a group of committed apprentices of Jesus Christ intentionally pursuing a deep relationship with God. We desire to learn from Jesus in order that our lives might be more transformed and conformed into Jesus’ image. We want to:

Believe what Jesus believed.

Live the way Jesus lived.

Love the way Jesus loved.

Minister the way Jesus ministered.

The Rule

The word “rule” comes from the Latin *regula*, meaning pattern, model, or example. We live in a culture of individualism, materialism, and privacy. Our deepest desire is for community. For us, a Christian is one who embraces the Rule in the spiritual life practiced in the Sankofa Community. Our rule relates to order of life, prayer, study, silence, solitude, and other disciplines—a life of spiritual liberty versus a life of cultural materialism and spiritual slavery:

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12: Two are better than one.

Matthew 10:25: A disciple is to be like his master.

Deuteronomy 30:19-20: Choose life, obey, love, cleave and dwell.

Matthew 7:24-27: Hear and do.

Matthew 22:37-40: Two commandments: love God and neighbor.

In order that we may not be conformed to this world but transformed into the image of God by renewal, we believe we must attend to and grow in our understanding of our:

MIND: Matthew 17:20: Mustard seed faith.

CHARACTER: Philippians 2:5-8: Humility, obedience.

RELATIONSHIPS: John 13:34,35: Love as I have loved.

SERVICE: Matthew 5-7: Sermon on the Mount.

AFRICA: Matthew 2: 13-15: Joseph took the child and fled to Africa. Our Savior came out of Africa.

The Practices

The word “practices” is defined as a pattern of common disciplines that are practiced by this community for spiritual formation.

Because we are a Christian covenant community, we will:

- Set aside time regularly for prayer, meditation, spiritual and scriptural reading, and practicing the presence of God in order to believe what Jesus believed.
- Welcome the Holy Spirit, employing spiritual disciplines, exercising spiritual gifts, nurturing the fruit of the Spirit, so we become more like Jesus.
- Be committed to a group of people whom we know and are known by, love and are loved by, serve and are served by, celebrate and are celebrated by.
- Continually seek to offer hospitality, respect, and reconciliation to whomever God brings into our lives.
- Seek to recognize God’s activity in the world, and be poised to join God to accomplish God’s purposes and invite others to do the same.
- By God’s grace, joyfully seek to show forth the presence of God in all that we are, in all that we do, and in all that we say.
- Reclaim and renew our connections to Africa and the journey of African-Americans on these shores.

We will do this because we want:

1. To deepen our relationship with God through establishing structure, rhythm, discipline, and accountability in our lives.
2. To strengthen our connection to the Power Source of our life and the agency of Spiritual Formation.
3. To live our lives in the give-and-take of Community, where God can develop trust, humility, submission, confession, and character in us.
4. To be an effective, sacrificial ambassador of God to those both inside and outside the kingdom of God.
5. To eagerly own and assume our responsibilities as co-laborers with Christ and eager servants of God.
6. To intentionally present ourselves as points of light through whom God’s kingdom can shine and touch all those in the world.

The Covenant We Make

Because we are disciples of Jesus the Christ, our Savior, Teacher, Lord, and Friend, we will pursue a deepening relationship with God, and will learn from Jesus to believe what Jesus believed, live the way Jesus lived, love the way Jesus loved, and minister the way Jesus ministered.

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A TWO-YEAR JOURNEY INTO
AFRICAN-AMERICAN SPIRITUALITY

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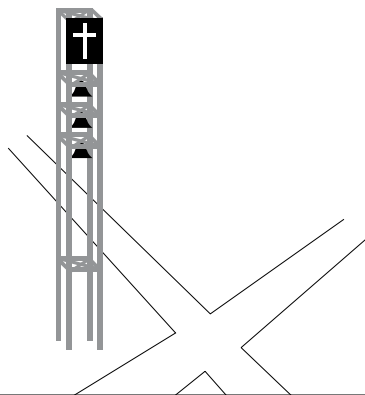
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END NOTES

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