

Black Churches Strive For One Agenda At National Conference

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In Tell Me More's weekly "Faith Matters" segment, host Michel Martin looks at the re-launching of a church organization representing the nine largest traditionally Black denominations. The Conference of National Black Churches has been meeting in Washington, DC, to tackle challenges facing the African American community today. Host Michel Martin speaks with the organization's chairman and Senior Pastor at New York's Grace Church, Reverend W. Franklyn Richardson, about the group's plans for change.

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MICHEL MARTIN, host:

And now it's time for our regular Friday segment, Faith Matters. That's where we talk about matters of faith and spirituality. And I want to talk about the term, the black church. To those who may not know, that could sound like a reference to one single institution with singular positions and views on different religious and social issues.

But just as there isn't one single African-American experience all black people share, the African-American faith community is made up of churches with diverse and sometimes conflicting positions on matters of spirituality and morality.

But now those churches are trying to work together for the sake of the communities they serve. A new group called the Conference of National Black Churches, made up of the largest nine traditionally African-American denominations representing some 30 million people in 50,000 congregations nationwide, is meeting this week in Washington.

We wanted to know more about this meeting so we've called upon the Reverend W. Franklyn Richardson. He convened the meeting. He's senior pastor of the historic Grace Baptist Church in Mount Vernon, New York. He's the chairman of the board of the Conference of National Black Churches. Welcome, thanks so much for joining us.

Reverend W. FRANKLYN RICHARDSON (Senior Pastor, Grace Baptist Church): Michel, delighted to be here.

MARTIN: Now, actually, this conference is a revived group. There was a group of the nine denominations, which existed previously. It has lapsed, it hasn't been meeting for several years and you've revived it. Why?

Rev. RICHARDSON: Well, the truth of the matter is, there has always been a desire among African-American Christians to climb over denominationalism. It was manifested in 1933, '34 with the Fraternal Order of Negro Churches of America. And then in '79, we had the Congress of National Black Churches. The absence of relationship makes us ineffective. We are only our best

selves when we are together. And so...

MARTIN: But why? Why? Is there a theological issue that you feel needs to be addressed - a spiritual issue? Or is it something else? What is it? Why now is the question.

Rev. RICHARDSON: We have gathered around social issues. Our theology is behind - it's always present. But what calls us together is the state of the African-American community today. Every measurement of quality of life in America, no matter what it is, if it's health, if it's foreclosures, if it's unemployment, if it's a prison population, if it's infant mortality, every issue, every measure of life for black people in this country is at the lowest. We come at the bottom of every measurement. That's crisis.

And the bad part about we're being crushed in a climate, where we have a black president, so that the consciousness of the general public is, whoa, black people succeeding, everything is fine. It's time for them to be on their own. Leave them alone.

MARTIN: If you're just joining us, this is TELL ME MORE from NPR News. We're speaking with the Reverend W. Franklyn Richardson about the Conference of National Black Churches. That's a newly convened organization of the nine largest traditionally African-American denominations in the country. They've been meeting in Washington, D.C.

I wanted to play a short clip for you. Earlier this year, Eddie Glaude, who's a professor of religion at Princeton, wrote a provocative essay that got a lot of attention, published in Huffington Post titled "The Black Church is Dead." And we talked to him about that piece, as well as other voices who wanted to respond to his piece. I'll just play a little bit of what he had to say. Here is it.

Professor EDDIE GLAUDE (Religion, Princeton University): We've imagined black churches as a kind of prophetic, progressive space. And much of that stems from its centrality to the Civil Rights Movement. And so, there's a standing kind of perception of black Christian churches.

And what I wanted to do was challenge that over and over again to what we know as a much more complicated picture. And when we look at black churches on the ground, we see them at least in their local context really on the frontlines of servicing their community, serving their congregants.

But when we think about, where are the prophetic voices on the national stage, instead of hearing prophetic voices most of the time, we're hearing voices that are aligned with a certain kind of conservative theological orientation.

MARTIN: Do you agree with Professor Glaude that the "black church" - and I'm doing the quotes, putting that in quotes - is falling down on the job?

Rev. RICHARDSON: Well, I've heard him say that the black church is on the frontline in the local communities. So I would say that, you know, that in itself gives him a kind of authentic relevance, but at the same time, one of the reasons we've come together is because we notice this absence of voice and this misrepresentation of who the church is at the local level.

You know, the absence of voice has allowed more conservative voices to come in and say they speak for the black church. They may speak for some aspect of it, but that's not the whole story. What we want to make sure is that the whole story of prophetic social engagement, public policy challenge is a part what it is that we do.

MARTIN: Going forward from here, what's next?

Rev. RICHARDSON: We have created partnerships around these four core areas. For instance, we have a partnership now with the Children's Defense Fund. What we plan to do is to help increase the numbers of Freedom Schools, for instance, in our children across the country. We also have made a new partnership with the United Negro College Fund.

We will help to funnel our students to the UFC schools. We also have a partnership in economic development with Global Hue and the largest marketing advertising firm, where we're developing a whole economic component where we challenge the economic fiber, the economic dynamic.

MARTIN: Let's say we get together at this time next year. How will you know whether you've succeeded or not and not just sort of rearranging the deck chairs and just, you know, having a confab with a lot of the people who are already involved in these issues and...

Rev. RICHARDSON: That's exactly our theme this week. We said that we're not here for just information and inspiration. We're here for implementation. So we leave this conference with a commitment to each other that when we come back next year we'll be able to point to schools we've made a difference with. We'll be able to point to health issues that we've established. We will be able to point to significantly how we have redirected the distribution of our economic path.

MARTIN: Reverend W. Franklin Richardson is the chairman of the board of the Conference of National Black Churches. It represents the nine largest traditionally African-American denominations in the country. He's also senior pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Mt. Vernon, New York, and he stopped by our Washington D.C. studios where the conference has been meeting over the last couple of days. Thank you so much for joining us, Reverend.

Rev. RICHARDSON: Michel, thank you for being a voice of clarity in the nation.

MARTIN: And happy holidays to you.

Rev. RICHARDSON: Same to you.

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