

T.D. Jakes' African Exchange

By Sonsyrea Tate

Bishop T.D. Jakes says his several trips to Africa have been the most thrilling experiences of his life. He enjoys meeting people that purely represent his own ancestry and culture, and enjoys adding to their quality of life through the gifts he gives.

“My goal as I travel back and forth to Africa is not just to preach, but to bring together teams of doctors to come in with medicine,” he told me. In Nairobi, a hospital wing is being dedicated to his ministry because of his work there. “I just love the people. I love their cultures. I love the diverse foods—and I feel needed there,” he said. “I think there is a way that we, particularly as African Americans—can respond in a unique and fresh way to the plight in Africa.”

As much work as Caucasian missionaries have done in African countries throughout centuries, they cannot do the work that African Americans can do. “I do not think they can replace the role of Joseph, and I use Joseph to speak of an African American who was sold into slavery, but has a responsibility to connect with his brothers again,” Jakes said. “For me it was a family reunion of sorts to be reconnected with my ancestral roots, and to be needed to bring wells and water and food and medicine blessed me with this feeling.”

Jakes appreciated the exchange. “They gave me a sense of my culture, of my heritage and ancestry,” he said. “The amazing thing about people is if you love them, they’ll love you back.”

Jakes was in town last week to attend the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation’s 36th Annual Legislative Conference at the Washington Convention Center, where he participated in a panel discussion on the evolution of the Black Church. Jakes joined Congressman Emanuel Cleaver, II, Rev. Dr. Floyd Flake, who is also a former congressman, Rev. James T. Meeks, a state senator from Illinois, and Jesse Jackson, Sr., a civil rights icon and founder of the Rainbow/Push Coalition.

They discussed the historically powerful partnerships between the Black Church and Black politicians, noting that most Black leaders in the past were elected through Black churches. They discussed the appropriateness of such partnerships now. Can aspiring politicians get elected without the support of the Black church today? Should pastors allow their pulpits to be pimped by aspiring politicians?

They agreed that Black lawmakers and the Black church should push for voting rights for ex-offenders. Jakes said ex-offenders get jobs and pay taxes and should be afforded the right to vote.

Rev. Flake, who now leads a congregation of 15,000, told of the importance of the Black church reaching young people where they are. No longer are young folks inspired to join a church to maintain family tradition. In his church, Flake attracts young people, including would-be gang members, by accepting them as they are and allowing them space to express their new spiritual awareness.

The panelists spoke of the historical milestones over which the Black church evolved, addressing social crises, including freedom from slavery, lynchings, and segregation.

Jakes told me in an interview after the panel discussion that it appears to him that more young Black men are attending church than in recent decades.

“Let me speak about my situation. My church is 10 years old. We’re somewhere over 30,000. Fifty-percent of our congregation is African American males,” he began.

“We have a responsibility to close the back door of the church,” he said. “We have to find a way to keep people in, and I think that in order to do that, there has to be a conversation between the pulpit and the pew, so that ministers remain sensitive to what the needs of the congregation are, and that the congregation better understands what the challenges of the ministers may be.”

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