

A focus on tradition

Photographer captures the changing customs of black churches

By Vanessa E. Jones, Globe Staff | May 22, 2006

A recent Sunday morning finds photographer Jason Miccolo Johnson in the middle of the route he took through the Boston area last Father's Day as he captured images for his new coffee table book, "Soul Sanctuary: Images of the African American Worship Experience." For a decade, Johnson traveled across the United States, visiting everything from small country churches to sprawling urban megachurches of various denominations. Charles Street African Methodist Episcopal Church in Roxbury, St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church in Cambridge, and Columbus Avenue African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in the South End were among them.

His goal: to collect images that detail the religious traditions of the black church.

At the moment, Johnson stands near the railing of the balcony at St. Paul, showing how he took those photos. During the early "Devotion" and "Proclamation" portions of the Mass, he aims his camera at the informal singers standing in front of the altar who welcome the parishioners with song. As the Mass proceeds, Johnson heads downstairs to the main part of the chapel, where he sits in a front-row pew, snapping photos of the choir as it flits from song to song. Then Johnson weaves in and out of the moving crowd, capturing members' interactions as they do the traditional exchange of "hellos" midway through the service. Throughout it all, the parishioners remain blissfully unaware of Johnson's snapping camera. Of the 15,000 images Johnson shot over the course of the project, only two from his time in Boston -- both taken at Charles Street Church -- made it into "Soul Sanctuary." But a selection of 44 of Johnson's church photographs, including some shot at the St. Paul and Columbus Avenue churches, is on display at Panopticon Gallery in Waltham through June 10.

Johnson's work provides documentary-like images of black church traditions, some of which date back to the days of slavery. Many consider the book the first of its kind.

"I have not seen a book that celebrates from a pictorial perspective our traditions across denominations and across regions as much as this book does," says the Rev. Gregory Groover, pastor of Charles Street Church.

As readers delve into the chapters of "Soul Sanctuary," which unfolds the way a church service does, from the unlocking of the church doors to the musical praises that kick off the service to the fervent prayer that takes place in the pews, they discover Johnson's other message. It has to do with his concern about church traditions across the country changing as small churches give way to larger ones and as churches struggle to attract young members.

Choirs are making way for dancers, flag wavers, and mimes who whip up the spirit while showcasing the previously untapped talents of the congregation.

Hymns dating back to slavery are being replaced by more contemporary songs. Churches that once offered congregants only the opportunity to usher or sing in the choir now offer ministries that support people struggling with HIV and drug addiction or welcome members whose extracurricular interests lie in the area of dance or audiovisual equipment.

On one hand, Johnson's book shows "how much the black church is doing," says Johnson, 49, who lives in Washington, D.C., "how much the black church is needed, and how much history and legacy is there that has been there all along."

Yet the underlying message is Johnson's concern about the loss of some of these traditions and the lack of respect he perceives from people who may take the church for granted.

"[The black church] needs to be more cherished than it is," says Johnson. "That's what I wanted to do: Let people know we have something special here; don't lose it, build upon it. Even as we incorporate some of the new [traditions], don't throw out the old ones."

Velma DuPont, who lives in the South End, strongly supports this stance. "There are so many of our rituals that are lost to contemporariness," says DuPont, who accompanied Johnson during his first trek through Boston last year and returned with him to St. Paul church for his second visit. "To respect these rituals, it's our history. I think it's absolutely necessary."

Expressive approach to God

Johnson made only one visit each to churches in California, Illinois, Virginia, and various other states. He planned his schedules down to the minute, figuring out how he could hit as many as three churches on a Sunday. He examined each potential subject's lighting situation beforehand, a key element since he only used available light.

One result from his Boston trek appears on page 63 of "Soul Sanctuary." The photo shows Elizabeth Davis, a greeter at Charles Street Church, reading church announcements. The woman in the second Charles Street Church photo, on page 54, whose face is shrouded in shadows, remained unidentified when the book went to print. Then one day, Curtis Jones, a trustee at the church, looked at the picture. It was Jones's wife, Gail, a steward at Charles Street.

In addition to spotlighting churchgoers, Johnson's camera also inadvertently captured the changes in religious tradition. When the Rev. LeRoy Attles was a child, he remembers, parishioners were more conservative in their practice.

"Years ago," says the St. Paul pastor, "in some very conservative churches, when you said 'Amen,' people would turn around and look at you. Today, unless it's a conservative church, you just won't see that."

On the Sunday of Johnson's second visit to St. Paul, some members of the congregation raise their hands skyward, shout out, and bob up and down as Attles gives his sermon. The faces featured in "Soul Sanctuary" show a wide range of emotions.

"Today," says Attles, "people are much more expressive . . . in their approach to God."

Meeting more needs

Flipping through "Soul Sanctuary," readers also become aware of the dramatic range in sizes of today's black churches. Johnson takes readers inside the intimate space of Jake's Chapel in Greenville, Miss. But he also shows the sprawling Ebenezer AME Church in Maryland, with its tiered movie theater seating and video screens behind the choir showing live shots of the service.

The increasing size of the congregations and the churches that cater to them has spurred changes in church traditions. When Johnson, a Memphis native, went to church as a child, he remembers only a few extracurricular opportunities for young people. They could sing in the choir or serve as an usher, he says. Now a church such as Charles Street offers an array of ministries: a nurse unit, a young adult network, and a Christian education department. The church just opened its Ruth Hamilton/Elta Garrett Music and Arts Academy, which helps children learn to read music as the public school system trims its music and arts education programs.

"There are a lot of needs out there that are being met through the church that we don't think about," says Johnson. "I dare say if you close down the black church, the world would be much, much worse off."

New sounds of worship

It's in the area of performance where traditions have changed the most. The old-school clapping of hands and stomping of feet, which for centuries provided a cymbal- and drum-like accompaniment to choirs, have been replaced by real drums, guitars, and organs. In an effort to get younger people to feel more comfortable in church, says Johnson, churches are adding praise step teams, praise flag wavers, and

liturgical dancers, like the four teens who perform their dance routine in flowing purple dresses just before Attles's sermon on the Sunday Johnson revisited St. Paul.

One change that bothers Groover is the increasing focus on praise and worship music, a genre exemplified by the songs of Kirk Franklin, Fred Hammond, and other contemporary artists. He worries that a new generation of churchgoers know nothing about traditional spirituals, such as "Ain't Got Time to Die" and "Ride On, King Jesus," that were first heard during slavery.

"We're opting for the . . . more contemporary music," says Groover, "which I think is a wonderful genre. But, please, don't let us lose our music, the music the slaves, our forefathers, our foremothers, used to sing."

Groover tries to stay the change. His church is home to five choirs, including one that sings only traditional gospel. He rotates that choir with others that focus on anthem, baroque and classical, and urban contemporary music to avoid alienating his younger members.

"A church has to embrace [contemporary music] to remain alive," Groover says, "otherwise they'll go to the grave."

But he refuses to stand by and watch calmly as the appreciation of the old fades.

"A people," he says, "will only be as strong as a people who appreciate their traditions." ■

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