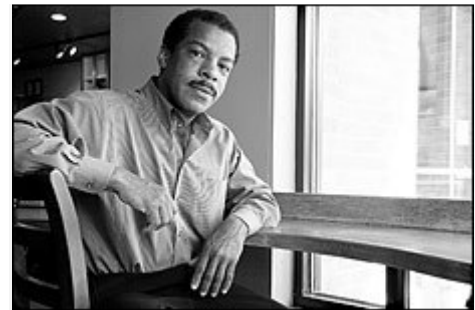


## Gaze and Worship

Shaw photog Jason Miccolo Johnson captures America's black churches.

By Andrew Beaujon

Friends hug and “pass the peace” in New Orleans. A step team lights up a service in Alexandria. Arms are raised, baskets are passed, and a minister in Eckington interprets the Gospel in whiteface—he’s miming. Jason Miccolo Johnson’s new book, *Soul Sanctuary: Images of the African American Worship Experience*, is the product of 10 years spent photographing black churches from New York to Texas, capturing weddings and funerals, music and quiet time, refreshments and reunions.



Shutter in His Presence: Johnson believes what he sees.  
(Photo by Pilar Vergara)

And he did it all without a flash. “You get blurs,” Johnson says about using only natural light, “but I wanted to give people the feel of the movement rather than have just hard-edged images.”

Johnson, 49, ran USA Today’s photo lab for three-and-a-half years before going freelance in 1989. He began landing jobs photographing national conventions of African-American denominations such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church. After the Shaw resident got a call from a friend who was doing a Washingtonian story on the Alfred Street Baptist Church in Alexandria, he ended up sticking around for five months to shoot the services every which way and eventually became a congregant there. Soon he was traveling around this region, then throughout the Deep South, checking out churches both significant to African-American history and simply important as fixtures in their respective towns. “Find a soul-food restaurant,” he says of his method for rolling into town a stranger and leaving an honorary congregant. “Find a beauty shop, barber shop. Stop and ask them.”

African-American denominations are “pretty much the same” at this point, Johnson says. “The thing that’s interesting is that...many of the worship customs are starting to blend. In other words, they’re starting to borrow from each other’s denominations, much like musicians borrow from each genre of music.” Soul Sanctuary documents various churches’ quirks—a beachside baptism in Reedville, Va., a glitzy wedding in Manhattan—but Johnson laid it out to mimic a typical church bulletin to emphasize the commonality of the black church experience.



Metropolitan Baptist Church, Washington, D.C., 1997  
(Photo by Jason Miccolo Johnson)

It’s in the gigantic megachurches sprouting in mostly black middle-class suburbs of D.C., Atlanta, and Dallas that Johnson found the hardest departure from that old-time religion. “It’s more rigid,” Johnson says of worship at churches like the 28,000-strong Potter’s House in Texas, whose pastor, TD Jakes, he captures in sweaty mid-sermon. “There’s not a lot of getting up and walking around.” It’s a departure from the historic way church has been done in America, he says. “Part of the black church experience is the camaraderie, the friendship of the people you see each week....In the megachurch, because you have another service coming in—it’s like a theater. You can’t stick around for two or three showings.”

Whenever possible, Johnson shot subjects in threes to represent the Holy Trinity—a row of tambourines in Houston, the Spirit-filled glow of three liturgical dancers taking five in New Orleans, a trio of handbell players in Largo, Md. But even though Johnson shares many of his subjects’ beliefs, he always tried to stay out of the frame. “One of the great compliments is when a minister says, ‘I didn’t see you take pictures,’” he says. “You want people to forget you. You just want to blend in.” CP



Second Baptist Church, Detroit, 2005  
(Photo by Jason Miccolo Johnson)