



practicing the faith

A CONVERSATION WITH

The Rev. Eugene Williams

THE REV. EUGENE WILLIAMS is executive director of Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches (LAM), a coalition of forty small and midsize congregations that works in South Central Los Angeles. In 1997, LAM advocated for state legislation to require parolees to obtain their GED equivalency. This legislation was designed as a strategy to combat California's high rate of recidivism and was a major victory for the organization. In March 2001, Donald Miller and Mia Thompson spoke with Williams about community organizing, the "Second Reconstruction," and his opinion of the President's faith-based initiative.

The USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture is pleased to present this series of interviews with clergy and leaders who influence civic life in California. The entire series can be viewed online at www.usc.edu/crcc.

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Please tell us about yourself and how you got your start in community organizing.

My grandmother and grandfather helped to build the Black-Jewish alliance in Philadelphia that remains in power today. I used to see politicians come to my grandmother's house and they would discuss issues. My mother was a union organizer and a tenant organizer, so I got the best of both worlds. At about thirteen, I started selling drugs and at sixteen, things began to crash and burn. I came into the house one night from a hard day's work, and I heard my mother, my brother, and my sister upstairs in the room crying. She had a note from the public housing officials that said, "Your son has been involved with drugs and a number of shootings and if you don't get him to stop, we're going to get you out of public housing." I remember my brother—my best friend—turning to me and saying, "You have all the money you want. You don't come home half the time. Why don't you just leave?" And that's when God began to touch my life.

Over a period of about a year, I went through hell and along came the Nation of Islam. This little short black man named Elijah Muhammad began to talk about cleaning up the streets. Here was a man from Georgia—with a third grade education—who had built the most powerful economic and socio-political machine. He talked about us leaving the gangs and dressing up and becom-

ing a model for the community. We began to turn abandoned stores into thriving businesses, building an economic base in the communities.

Years later, I went into the service for a couple years, and came back and continued to organize. An organizer with the West Oak Lane Concerned Citizens (WOLCC) came to me and said, "Do you want to be an organizer?" I said, "What's an organizer?" He said, "They do what you do and they get paid for it." He enrolled me into the VISTA [Volunteers in Service of America] program—one of the most influential programs of its time.

Right before I went to work for WOLCC, there were a number of my friends who were murderers, drug dealers, and just cold-hearted people. When I came home, they were talking about this guy, Reverend Thomas Taylor. "You have to see this man. We ain't hustlin' no more, we're going to church!" I was like, "Man, y'all Jesus freaks, don't give me none of that!" One day, I went to the church, and Reverend Taylor spoke to me, and it was like he hit me over the head with a bat. There was an altar call, and I went up in tears. God touched my life long before I ever knew it. It's been his grace and his goodness that has gotten me where I am and everything I've done has prepared me for now.

How do you view your work as a minister and as an organizer within the context of the African American Church?

For the most part, the African American Church has lost its savor. We can build good community development corporations, we can talk about our numbers, we can build huge edifices, but our prophetic vision has been lost. We have adopted a corporate structure to the church. From a biblical standpoint, I walk in a prophetic office. My role is to place the prophetic traditions back in the center of the church. Most large churches have a supermarket mentality, where you're a consumer. You go in and you pay your resources, you pay your tithes. In exchange you are treated like a consumer. Come hear the word on Sunday. Come to the next conference. While waiting for the next conference pop in the tapes and read the books about the conference. In the end you consume a lot but produce very little prophetically. You can get lost in those congregations, and that's the way a lot of people like it! Now what we've got to do is do a better job at doing what folks did to Nehemiah. They came to Nehemiah and said, "You sit here amongst the king and you have this good position, but the walls of Jerusalem are in ruin! Nehemiah, you have to come back!" It's challenging, but we've got to find a way to call them back into a prophetic mode.

What role can the large churches play?

We need the large steeple churches to play their role. We need their wealth of intellectual capital. We need their wealth of training, but we need to marry that with small to midsize churches. Experience has taught me that small to midsize churches have a wealth of untapped human capital, and, because most of these churches have pastors who are bi-vocational, they run with volunteer leadership. They tend to draw from the neighborhoods around those churches. Most of the churches that we work with have between 75 to 300 members, sixty to seventy percent of whom are low to moderate income.

Sixty percent of our pastors are bi-vocational for financial reasons, or should be. This creates a dynamic where the talent is there; it's just not nurtured in many cases. In fact, the small-to-midsize churches have a significant role to play. Orlando Costas, in a book called *Christ Outside the Gate*, documented the Protestant church in Chile that doubled in size every ten years between 1930 and 1960. When it was small, the churches were prophetic and spoke out against the oppression of the Chilean government. At the height of their growth, they were supporting the oppression of General Pinochet. The role of the small to midsize church must be validated, and seen as necessary and kingdom building.

LAM successfully organized and lobbied the California State Legislature to pass the GED initiative, legislation to combat recidivism by increasing literacy. Can you tell us about the process?

One of the things that interested me in coming to California was the ballot initiative process. I knew that corrections policy and education policy in the country were dictated in two places: California and New York. It's a good bet that whatever occurs in California and New York, it'll roll itself out to the rest of the country. So, we looked at how we could do an initiative that would be a progressive wedge issue. We knew that a conservative could not argue with African American churches teaching ex-offenders how to read and how to write. That's personal responsibility. We knew that the liberals would never argue against literacy; it was a wedge that then forced all to move.

We formed a research team and the numbers jumped out at us. Seventy percent of all repeat offenders have one common trait, they are all illiterate. California's prison-industrial complex is a multi-billion dollar industry for young African American and Latino males to be housed in. Then I began to reflect on my own experience; I was an average guy in my neighborhood; the most talented guys that I knew were either incarcerated or dead.

We began to look at the role of probation and parole as re-entry managers, and we knew that that system was breaking down. In years past, before an ex-offender got out of prison, parole would look at the place that he wanted to live, mandate that he get employment, and help him with support services. Well, with the massive shift towards incarceration and prison enhancements, parole and probation got de-funded, and their caseloads exploded because of the drug epidemic. We had the idea from the very beginning that faith-based institutions can act as re-entry managers.

We also knew that most mainline Protestant and Catholic denominations had judicatory structures that enabled them to negotiate with power at the state level and we knew that African American churches did not. We saw it as an opportunity to strengthen these African American churches by moving county-by-county, based on denominational relationships.

We started [the GED Initiative] in L.A. County and proved that it could be done; it took three and a half years to build the infrastructure. Training through public action in San Diego took eighteen months, and passed the county board of supervisors in forty-five days. When we built an empire in San Bernardino and Riverside simultaneously, within thirty days after we gave them the concept, they passed the resolutions simultaneously. California created the model legislation; Pennsylvania and Illinois have introduced similar legislation. Colorado, Texas, and Georgia have also looked at it.

One of the recurring themes of your social analysis is that the United States is entering a period similar to Reconstruction following the Civil War. Can you describe this analysis and how you arrived there?

Reconstruction was a period after Emancipation. The Southern planters that had controlled the economy either left or did not agree to participate in reconstructing the economy. The ex-slaves were empowered through the Freedmen's Bureau—federal interven-

tion—to become sharecroppers. They were given land. There were experiments, such as the forty acres and a mule experiment on the Sea Islands. African Americans had a challenge because they were still largely an illiterate community. They would sign sharecropper contracts that would, in effect, make them indentured servants. In spite of that, African Americans began to acquire wealth. The ex-slaves started to do well—they were in Congress, and they were running local cities—and the power structure said, “Wait a minute, this is getting out of hand.” Before the election in 1876, there was a lot of tension in the South. When the election occurred, Samuel Tilden won the popular vote, but because of disputed votes in Florida and Oregon, the election was called into question and Rutherford B. Hayes was seated as President. (The framers of the Constitution were real clear. They were landowners, and they weren’t interested in giving people real control over the government, so they created an Electoral College. You could give people the right to participate, but if necessary you could actually pull a plug on it. I think people just saw that occur [in 2000].)

After the election, they agreed to withdraw federal troops in the South and give states control of governments. This ended Reconstruction. Slowly but surely, laws were put into place to disempower the African American community. Prior to this period, there were local jails, but the first state correctional system rose out of the end of this Reconstruction period. Other things occurred such as the Black Codes, which became known as Jim Crow, and the dismantling of the federal safety net. Vagrancy and other laws were being used at the end of the First Reconstruction to create indentured servants out of African Americans. The correctional system was used to employ semi-skilled and unskilled white workers.

Well, if we fast-forward, we see the same things occurring, with one twist: the Latino population, which has become sixteen percent of the prison population in this country. When I looked at what was occurring in California, I saw that since 1985,

California had been involved in the largest prison expansion project in the history of the United States. Today, California has the third largest industrial prison-industrial complex in the world.

Reconstruction marked a major turning point in the question of states’ rights. How is our current situation similar?

Ronald Reagan began to institute the doctrine of states rights and by about ’93, it became clear that this was the way the country was headed. A year and a half ago, there was a series of five to four Supreme Court rulings that ruled on states sovereign immunity that basically said that if a small business is injured by the state, it has no remedy at the federal government. Now, not a lot of people are paying attention to this, but this basically overturns the Civil War. We also looked at public education, and we saw the debate about charter schools, and things like that, then the ballot initiatives: Propositions 189, 184, 209, these things were occurring. If you look at this from the African American perspective, it became clear what was happening. States rights is the name of the game. I think the conservatives began to play a very dangerous game in the late 1980s, and that was to vilify the federal government. The message that came out was that all government was bad; we need to get government out of our lives. Well, that hit a chord for a moment, until Oklahoma City.

After Reconstruction, there was also a large degree of benevolence on the part of some leaders. I would place George Bush in that historical context. So now I think there will be a period of benevolence leading up to what I think will be some horrendous times. If you look at conditions between 1900 and 1928, you actually saw massive mergers, deregulation, speculation, and wealth became so concentrated that the economy went into meltdown. Nobody can argue with what’s occurred in the stock market with mergers and speculation. I think what’s happened now is that wealth is so concentrated in the hands of a few that a melt down is inevitable.

If we weren’t in the middle of it, I would be chuckling at the conservative argument that free market economies, massive deregulation, and mergers were good for the country.

What are some of the other challenges to society and what role can the African American churches play?

I think King said it best when he said that many of the Negro middle class are sitting back in some passionless realm believing that somehow they’ve achieved this on their own. It’s a sin that they have all of those unnamed, unlettered African Americans that really provided the base and had the political power that enabled them to be in the positions of where they are [today]. To borrow a quote, “There is a whole lot of high-tech lynching going on in our neighborhoods!” I think the African American church can demystify a lot of that. For example, a couple months ago, John DiIulio apologized for an article he wrote on the rise of the “super-predators.” He apologized for it! At the time, that was a high-tech lynching because it gave the theoretical framework under which DA’s in this country really began to turn up the heat on large numbers of people, and in many cases, falsely so. There was a very sensitive moment in my relationship with John where I wrote him a letter about young African American men and women and many young people being labeled as “super-predators.” There was a time in my life you would have considered me a predator, but nothing was further from the truth. When you see these kind of clichés—“three strikes and you’re out”—that’s a high-tech lynching. Right now in this country, we have the last third of welfare folks in a position where they’ll never be able to get benefits again. The first two-thirds were easy because they were semi-employable and they have some skills, but the third that we’re dealing with now is not employable. There’s no hope for them getting any skills according to conventional wisdom. I suspect that all hell is going to break loose when that third finally realizes that their benefits are

over, so the church can—like we did at the end of the First Reconstruction—provide a place for them to come to and a way for them to survive.

The church as an institution can return to being an economic center, as well as a spiritual and educational center for a community—and not just large steeple churches. I think that some of our large steeple churches are in trouble because while the crowds may be there now, seventy percent of all middle class black folks work in some form of government. As you continue to downsize government, you downsize those positions. Corporate America is laying off middle management in droves in this country. Eventually, that begins to hit home in the church. So, those smaller and midsize congregations can provide us with some real stability and real base. It's going to be necessary because not everybody is going to have employment opportunities.

What is your feeling about the new administration's euphoria over faith-based programs?

Most small-to-midsize churches in this country will never be able to take advantage of that faith-based wealth—never. I think God has ordained it that way. Your large steeple churches will get the lion's share—people like Catholic Charities and Episcopal Community Services and others. They should, because they have these national infrastructures. But the black church is in trouble because its national structures are weak, ineffective, and without a lot of vision in terms of this kind of public policy shift.

Now, my good friend John DiIulio and George Bush want some high-profile black churches. They are going to select a few ministries and use them as examples of what can be done by placing these churches in national demonstration projects that bring in professionals to run programs. They will use churches as volunteers and mentors, attempt to replicate the projects, and have evaluation components. The administration is going to block grant a lot of money to the states, but it's inter-

esting: most black denominations will not be in a position to take advantage of that money. I think that that is God speaking. Being shut out will force the black church to act in the prophetic, as it should. Whenever this country has moved to a more moral position, it has been in some way linked to the black church organizing. So that's our blessing and our burden.

What I'm troubled by is that you hear a lot of people talk about this faith-based initiative, particularly Black churches, and they're gearing themselves up to run towards the money. For small to midsize churches, if they're not careful, some might actually get contracts of fifty to one hundred thousand dollars, and it will wreck their ministries. They do not have the financial oversight. Even if they do, they don't have the organizational infrastructure to make it real.

If I'm receiving a million dollars of government money, then I won't be as prophetic as I need to be, or as I could be had I not taken that money. It's too seductive. If you know anything about government money, they never pay on time! While they're paying on time initially, if you do something that's contrary to what they want, then the funding stops. If you begin to put a lot of emphasis on this, guess what? Your funding dries up.

There are some of us who need to support this ship and I believe that faith-based institutions have a role to play. It's funny that we're talking about faith-based institutions in this way because in the black community, faith-based institutions have been engaged in these kinds of work and practices since their existence.

How would you contrast what you are trying to do as an organizer in small to midsize churches with what President George Bush is attempting to do by relying on the faith community?

I would contrast the difference between maintenance versus empowerment. The initiative, for the most part would be a maintenance issue. We're going to let you be volunteers and mentors while

we run these programs out of the churches. We're going to let you do drug treatment, we're going to open up those opportunities, that's maintenance! What I do is the prophetic. What has God called this church to do on this date, at this time, in this community? Where are the oppressed? What are the conditions that are unjust? Now we have to deal with those issues of justice. If it means that it puts us in partnership with these folks, fine, but let us never forget why we're in partnership. We're not in partnership because we like the DA, or because we tend to like or dislike a police chief. We're in partnership because we know that this prison-industrial complex, in our case, is destroying large numbers of African American men and women and is destabilizing our community. I believe there are three hundred thousand ex-offenders a year that are going into parole, and they're going to less than 250 or 300 ZIP codes in this country. It has a destabilizing influence. Sixteen percent of all of these people released from California prisons go into San Bernardino. That's a destabilizing element, and we've got to organize to augment that. They're being sent back to the most vulnerable locations in our community.



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