

# The Healing Wisdom of Those Who Came Before

Discovering spiritual direction in an African American context | DARRELL GRIFFIN

I was in my sixth year as the pastor of Oakdale Covenant Church in Chicago—my fifteenth in full-time ministry—before I even heard of spiritual direction. At the time, I was overwhelmed and felt like I was on a downward spiral spiritually. I was the pastor of a congregation in transition, not just because they were adjusting to me as their pastor, but also because they were establishing their identity without their previous pastor. My predecessor had retired after thirty years of ministry; his legacy was great and the expectations placed upon me were enormous. The work was taking its toll on me physically, spiritually, and emotionally. I was in desperate need of divine intervention.

At the advice of a mentor I sought out a spiritual director. I began to regain the intimacy of my relationship with Christ, and the fire of my calling was re-ignited. I was introduced to time-tested spiritual traditions and practices that have helped Christians throughout the ages to discern God's desire for their lives as they journey with him. Silent retreats, spiritual readings, and meetings with a spiritual director all helped me appreciate

the ministry of spiritual direction.

Yet there was still a void in my understanding. I struggled to incorporate the African American religious experience and tradition into the context of spiritual direction. In fact, I found, to my surprise and disappointment, that my congregation reacted to the ministry of spiritual direction with ambivalence and distrust.

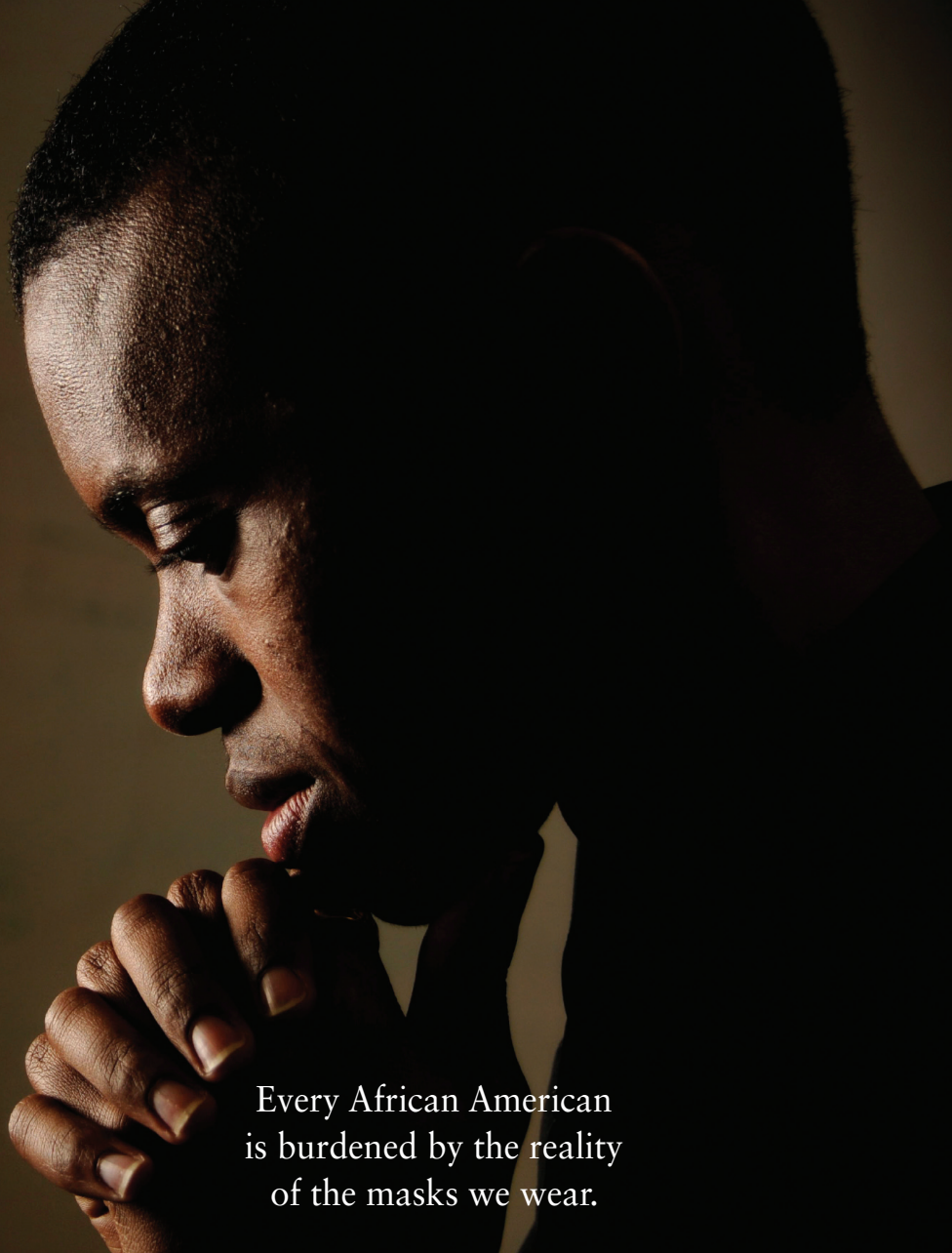
For one thing, the term *spiritual direction* was unfamiliar to my congregation and, in fact, to many Protestant African Americans. This ministry focuses on listening, discernment, and prayer in a confidential setting of encouragement and compassion. In such a context, a spiritual companion listens to the stories of another's life to help discern the presence and work of God's Spirit. But in the African American community, to entrust the story of one's sacred journey to another person is a precious gift. For many African Americans such intimate sharing of sacred stories outside of the office of pastor is unheard of.

I have heard many respond to this idea saying, "Why should I talk about my faith journey with someone outside of the clergy?" and "Pastor, you need to be careful about connecting us

to something that is so 'new age.'" In fact, although there is a heavy reliance upon clergy to give direction in the African American church, the avenues for that direction are usually found in the Sunday morning worship, Sunday school, Bible study, or small groups—not in one-on-one sessions.

Furthermore, in my community the past is as important as the present and the future. Finding precedent in African American tradition for new practices is not just important, it is essential. The faith we practice today must have some elements from our past. If we are to practice spiritual direction, African Americans need spiritual direction that is grounded in African American tradition.

In fact, African Americans around the country are exploring the practice of spiritual direction, and their contributions will bring profound healing and wholeness to our community. In *Beyond the Suffering: Embracing the Legacy of African American Soul Care and Spiritual Direction*, authors Robert Kellemen and Karole Edwards trace the history and legacy of the African American religious experience while uncovering the unique streams of spiritual direction for African



Every African American  
is burdened by the reality  
of the masks we wear.

Americans. The practices of healing, reconciling, and guiding others along the journey are grounded in the African American experience. It was a gift for me to realize that spiritual direction and soul care have been a force in the African American community for centuries.

The practice of seeking spiritual wisdom from another has roots in African American history. Slaves would meet in secret with their own leaders in slave quarters and ask them for spiritual guidance and comfort. In this crucible of separation and suffering, the African American religious experience was formed.

Kellemen and Edwards also note that African American spirituals and slave narratives are full of metaphors that promoted companionship and

soul care. These songs, chants, and stories reminded slaves of their homeland and sustained them in their separation and bondage. They also were a means to seek God's wisdom. Wherever they met or congregated, African Americans consoled and strengthened themselves and one another with spiritual songs and sacred chants.

In our community today we still sing stories that are laced with spiritual direction metaphors. For example, Jesus is depicted as a companion or guide in "I Want Jesus to Walk with Me," which includes the words, "I want Jesus to walk with me; all along my pilgrim journey, Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me. In my trials, Lord, walk with me; when my heart is almost breaking, Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me." Other songs

are "I Don't Feel No Ways Tired," and "When the Storms of Life Are Raging, Lord Stand by Me." For those who minister to the African American community these resources are invaluable. Shared with the wider ecclesial community, they can be a great treasure from which all can draw and find comfort. The themes of overcoming suffering and hardship have universal application regardless of the ethnic community.

African American writer James Baldwin said, "Love takes off masks that we fear we cannot live without, and know we cannot live within." Every African American is burdened by the reality of the masks we wear. ►

---

**Darrell Griffin** is pastor of Oakdale Covenant Church in Chicago and a member of the Executive Board of the Covenant.

From the day an African American is born in the United States he or she is reminded that institutional racism is alive and deadly. Survival in this racially charged climate requires us to put on masks.

As I explored the intersection of the ministry of spiritual direction with my African American community, I was moved to examine the masks that I wear. I wear masks as an African American male, son, brother, husband, father, pastor, and community leader. For example, as an African American male, I can never go out without my identification. Moving around my neighborhood or city without identification could cost me my life. Even with my academic degrees from Morehouse College, Harvard Divinity School, and North Park Theological Seminary, I am not shielded from random police stops and searches. The mask is very heavy, yet it is necessary for my survival. It is this awareness that I bring to the ministry of spiritual direction, and like my ancestors, I draw upon my faith tradition to cope with and survive this difficult reality. Thus I can serve as a companion for others who share the burden of wearing multiple masks.

Similarly, pastors in the African American church don a mask that has become increasingly difficult to wear. They are not just assigned to care for the congregation. Their pastoral responsibilities include leadership roles within the broader community as well. The pressure to be all things to all people is great, and some of these expectations are very unrealistic. Someone has described “perfect” pastors as those who preach twenty minutes and sit down. They condemn sin without offending anybody, work sixteen-hour days doing everything from preaching to sweeping, make \$400 a week and give \$200 back to the church, wear nice clothes, have a

We are beginning the return to the traditions and heritage that are precious to us for reasons we don’t always fully understand.

model family, support good causes, and help panhandlers who stop by the church. They are thirty-six, and have been preaching for forty years. They have a burning desire to work with the youth, and spend all of their time with the senior citizens. They smile constantly while keeping a straight face; they have a keen sense of humor that finds them seriously dedicated. They make twenty visits a day, spend every waking moment evangelizing, and are always in their office in case they are needed. They also burn out and die at age thirty-seven!

In his book *Preaching Through a Storm*, H. Beecher Hicks Jr. sums up my feelings about the pastorate in the African American community when he writes, “The pastorate is the worst job you will ever love. Its demands are unreasonable, its calling inescapable, its machinery often unworkable, its concepts difficult to grasp, and the political realities of the work make ‘success’ almost impossible to achieve.... We always live with the uneasy knowledge that we are not, and never can be, what others think we are.”

As I began to understand the weight of my pastor’s mask, I needed to uncover who is living under it. I realized that the masks I wear have been in place for so long that I can no longer identify who I am without them. The journey to find the real me is very difficult.

However, it is a relief to finally identify what these masks are. I have always sensed this burden but was unable to properly name it until now. Although I have some difficult work

ahead, the naming of each of my masks has been liberating. I know that the experience will transform me and in the future other pastors who share in my struggle.

As I move deeper into the ministry of spiritual direction, I am more confident that there is a place for African Americans at this table. Regardless of our ethnic backgrounds, each of us longs for a more conscious experience of God’s presence and love. Each of us has sacred stories unfolding within us that invite our attention. Spiritual direction provides a place to notice, discern, and discover where God is present and active in our everyday lives.

I am persuaded that the absence of such spiritual direction and care is significantly responsible for the all-too-common distance and shallowness in our experiences of God. This void has caused so many to miss the moves of God in their everyday life as well as the opportunity for a deeper connection with Christ. I look forward to a deeper journey of spiritual direction and the opportunity to take this life-changing ministry to others.

As I translate the spiritual direction terms and concepts into my African American context, I am seeing an explosion of spiritual renewal and healing both in my congregation and in my own life. We are beginning the return to the traditions and heritage that are precious to us for reasons we don’t always fully understand. The journey home to attend to the needs of our soul touches something central, and it resonates deeply with who we are. Spiritual direction provides a missing piece to the puzzle of our African American experience and being. The real joy is that we have begun the journey of spiritual direction and we are moving toward a more fulfilled life in Christ and fellowship with one another. ■