



**From Black Church**  
→ **to New Thought**

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## What **New Thought** Can Learn from the **Black Church**

No experience in America quite matches the traditional Black church on a Sunday morning. The roof-raising music, the sermon exhortations, the dancing and sometimes fainting. Not every church is the same, but most often, African customs brought over by the enslaved combine with music and messages that resonate with a community who often feels marginalized.

Many Black ministers and church members who are now part of the New Thought spiritual movement grew up in these conservative Christian churches. They remember them fondly and still miss elements of the church services, especially the music. So why did they leave? What have they found in New Thought—in churches such as Unity, Centers for Spiritual Living, and the Universal Foundation for Better Living—that serves them better?

In this booklet, our writers remember the pros and cons of the Black church and tell why and how they came to New Thought. You'll discover they have not abandoned their roots. Instead they've learned the two can be integrated through music, teaching, and prayer in creative ways that speak to nearly everyone.

We hope this booklet informs and enlightens readers as it reveals how blending experiences from the Black church has been strengthening New Thought through these remarkable leaders.

Your Friends in Unity

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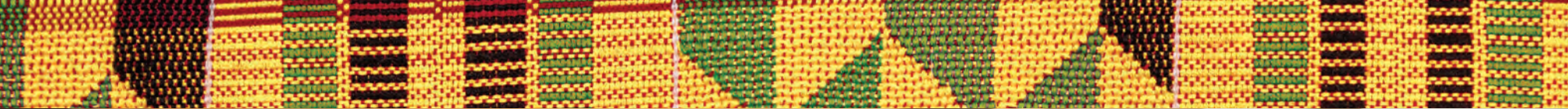
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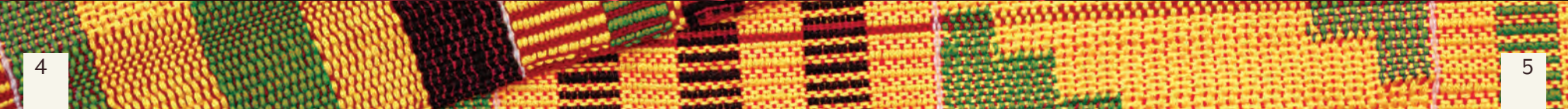
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# MUSIC





## Joy and Justice

REV. DINAH CHAPMAN

Raised in the African-American Pentecostal tradition of the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), I did not exactly leap into New Thought overnight. It was more like a 20-year spiritual evolution. COGIC was of course foundational to my formation and gave me a tremendous sense of spiritual community and belonging, provided a safe space, and gave me a deep and abiding love for God, scripture, prayer, and, yes, gospel music.

My upbringing was filled with preaching and music. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and my dad were both preachers. Their leadership and preaching on love stuck with me. During the civil rights rallies and marches of the 1950s and '60s, I recall hearing music from Mahalia Jackson, the Freedom Singers, and the Staple Singers, to name a few. My mother loved gospel music, and it played in our house all the time.

In 1969, the music of Edwin Hawkins (from COGIC) crossed over to the pop charts. His hit “Oh Happy Day” began playing all across the U.S. The music of Andraé Crouch, the Clark Sisters, Walter Hawkins,

and many more followed. Years later I learned that Dr. King gave his last “mountaintop” speech in the COGIC headquarters auditorium in Memphis, Tennessee, where I had sat during many services at our annual convocations. History was being made all around me and right in the church. This is where joy and justice came together for me.

By the '70s I ventured into charismatic churches, but what never left me was my joy of singing and my gospel roots.

A few more years went by and I found Unity. I moved to California in 2000 and got a fresh new start. At my Unity church, I returned to focusing on my music and spiritual enrichment and education. One day I met with my minister and asked how to approach the ministerial path. I shared with her the call to ministry I had felt way back in college, and it was not only for music.

At the 2012 Unity People's Convention in Detroit, Michigan, I felt the call to go on to seminary. In my first year, I enrolled in a class based on the book *Creating a World That Works for All*, taught by the author Sharif Abdullah. It was timely because the shooting death of Trayvon Martin was still very much in the news. There didn't seem to be much conversation around social justice in Unity circles. To me, the world did not seem to be working well for unarmed Blacks. So I worked wherever I could: on MLK Day planning committees, at a convention luncheon, and facilitating Authenti-Speak, a discussion forum on inclusivity and diversity at Unity Village.

I knew I wanted to do more. Justice, equity, and inclusivity work had become the areas that chose me. I thought I would create an alternative ministry about joy. But one day it occurred to me, *Why not do both—justice and joy?*

I led an all-day inclusivity training for the Unity West Central Region and a few other centers. But interest seemed to cool until the murder of George Floyd in 2020. That year it was uplifting to find this quote in Barbara A. Holmes' book, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*:

Joy beckons us not as individual monastics but as a community. It is a joy that lives as comfortably in the shout as it does in silence. It is expressed in the diversity of personal spiritual disciplines and liturgical rituals. This joy is our strength ...

This helped pull it all together. Yes, I'm a child of the Black Pentecostal tradition that was there for me in my youth, and I've had contemplative practices all along, such as the soulful *yes* praise that masses of us would sing at our annual convocation. It's still relevant and reverent for me. I can also add meditation, affirmative prayer, and go into the Silence, if I so choose. It's all rich and sacred, holy ground.

Today we need this exuberant joy *and* we need justice to roll down like water. Joy provides a sanctuary moment for us anytime and anywhere. So along with the chorus of the many prophetic voices, I will continue to work for the beloved community and for a just world, for divine love, peace, justice, and joy. In the meantime, you might still hear me clapping on the two and four, shouting *hallelujah*, *amen*, and *namaste*. It's a both/and.

*Rev. Dinah Chapman is a Unity minister in Northern California who is researching spiritual practices related to joy and justice for a doctoral degree. She is a diversity and inclusion workshop facilitator and singer/songwriter.*

# Song of the Soul

REV. KATHY BEASLEY



Growing up in the Black church, I was immersed in a world where faith, culture, and community were set to music that seamlessly blended a unique spiritual experience. The rhythms of gospel music and the soulful melodies weren't just sounds to me; they were profound expressions of devotion that stirred something deep within me. These musical expressions were more than mere notes; they were the spiritual heartbeat of our community, connecting us in a shared experience.

The Black church of my youth, with its vibrant traditions and spirited refrains, was where I felt a profound sense of belonging. Its rich

history—rooted in African traditions and fused with elements of blues and jazz—was a testament to resilience and hope. It conveyed stories of struggle and triumph, echoing the journey of a people who had faced adversity with unwavering faith.

As I journeyed through life, I sought a deeper understanding of personal and practical spirituality that transcended the confines of any single tradition or shared experience. This quest led me to New Thought's philosophy, emphasizing universal principles and affirmative prayer. Here in New Thought, I discovered a profound Truth that resonated with my soul: the recognition of the divine essence within us all.

The convergence of Black church music and New Thought spirituality expanded the expression of my worldview in ways I couldn't have anticipated. I now understand that spirituality isn't confined to a single path but can simultaneously embrace various teachings and experiences. It is a revelation that has enriched my life and deepened my appreciation for the interconnectedness of all creation.

If ever there were a soundtrack of the soul, it is for me the moment that the music of the Black church, with its jubilant hymns and heartfelt spirituals, became a metaphor for the human journey—a journey marked by trials and triumphs. It reminds me that faith and music are universal languages that have the power to transcend cultural boundaries. These songs, whether sung in a traditional church or the context of New Thought gatherings, carry a message of hope and resilience, reminding us of our innate ability to overcome what is before us by calling forth what is within us.

I have found a harmonious resonance in the blend of Black church music and New Thought spirituality. The music becomes the bridge,

connecting the cultural richness of my upbringing with the study of Truth principles. It is a constant reminder that spirituality is a personal and ever-evolving journey that can draw wisdom from diverse sources while honoring the authenticity of our individual and communal experiences.

Reflecting on my journey, I am grateful for the powerful blend of faith, culture, and music that shaped my upbringing in the Black church, and I cherish the insights gained through New Thought. The harmony of the two has taught me that our spirituality is a vibrant tapestry woven from various threads, each contributing to the rich outpicturing of our lives.

My journey has been more than a transit from one point to another, but a way of being all I know myself to be, demonstrating a sense of wholeness where nothing is broken, devalued, or left out. The melodies that once echoed through the brick-and-mortar sanctuary now find resonance in the rhythm of my thoughts, intentions, and beliefs. The foundation of faith and community nurtured within the Black church remains a cornerstone of my spiritual identity.

At the same time, the principles of New Thought have expanded my expression of the Divine and the boundless potential within us all. In essence, the melodies of the past continue to reverberate as I embrace the power of the present. My journey reminds me that New Thought spirituality is an ongoing exploration enriched by a willingness to blend all of who we are, our experiences, and our expressions to create a unique fusion of faith powerful enough to become the song of my soul.

*Rev. Kathy Beasley is senior manager of the Unity Prayer Ministry and associate minister at Unity of Central Florida in Orlando.*