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Ringling in year with prayers, not parties

Black tradition recalls first freedoms, renews spirit of community

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This New Year's Eve, Bishop Simon Gordon will not uncork a bottle of bubbly at midnight. Instead, at 11:55 p.m. he will drop to his knees in prayer and ask his South Side congregation to do the same.

When the calendar does turn to 2006, the silence inside the sanctuary will be broken with the harmony of beloved hymns rather than the traditional party chorus of "Auld Lang Syne."

Such is the tradition at many black churches of all denominations across the city and suburbs, where Watch Night ceremonies will be held until shortly after midnight. The tradition dates back nearly 150 years to a night when slaves gathered in underground churches to await their official freedom.

U.S. President Abraham Lincoln had declared that the Emancipation Proclamation would become law at the dawn of 1863. The moment was hugely important to black Americans, though it wasn't until the 13th Amendment was ratified in 1865 that slavery was finally abolished in the United States.

While some churches celebrate the anniversary of emancipation--Jan. 1--as a holy day, most black churches consider New Year's Eve the more sacred milestone, gathering every Dec. 31 to honor Lincoln's intention and commemorate the promise of a new year.

Today pastors suffuse the worship service with a sense of renewed purpose--one of gratitude and empowerment to pursue new dreams in the months ahead. Some incorporate the observance of Kwanzaa to remind members of their African roots.

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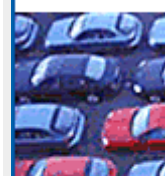
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"The turn of the year is generally a marker when everyone gets on one accord and sets the objectives," said Gordon, pastor of Triedstone Full Gospel Baptist Church in the Morgan Park neighborhood. "Rather than allowing society to dictate what behavior will be and what celebration will be, we start with practicing and giving thanks to God for the new year."

Watch Night services also have been embraced by white evangelical churches as an alternative to worldly celebrations, a night to watch for God's presence. But the event is most treasured among black congregations because of its historical significance.

For many black Christians, New Year's Eve has always been the time to atone for sins, give thanks to God and pray for another year of blessings. Rev. Jeremiah Wright, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ, said he could not remember a time in his 64 years when he did not welcome the new year inside a sanctuary. It was the tradition by which his parents were raised and they raised him.

Over the years, new traditions have come and gone. Wright used to invite worshipers to jot down notes about what they wished to leave behind in the old year. The pile of discarded memories would burn inside the sanctuary. But now that thousands fill the pews at Trinity for two Watch Night services, the practice would be a fire hazard, he said.

Instead, worshipers are asked to write down and keep a New Year's aspiration. Members know better than to wish for material gain, Wright said.

"You look forward to a new year in terms of doing some good--'What are you going to do in the new year to help someone else?' It's that kind of prayer," he said. "If we're not doing anything here about the social conditions in which people live, our faith is meaningless."

That quest to alter the political system and make life better for African-Americans was what the first nationwide Watch Night was all about, said Dwight Hopkins, a theology professor at the University of Chicago's Divinity School.

In the years before the Civil War, slaves of individual plantations would gather on Dec. 31 when plantation owners often determined which slaves they would have to sell to balance their books, Hopkins said. Slaves would pray that their families would not be divided.

But in 1862 the New Year's vigil took on new significance. At the time, black churches were the wellspring for acts of resistance, such as the Underground Railroad. It was against the law for blacks to gather for worship. Slaves across the country met secretly to watch the clock and pray for the Emancipation Proclamation to take effect.

Even afterward, commemorating Watch Night was still a dangerous undertaking, as it took two more years for the Civil War and slavery to end. Many congregations who observe Watch Night, Hopkins said, fail to grasp the revolution for social justice that it represents.

"Most churches today have a deep appreciation for the cultural significance of the Watch Night, but a majority have failed to remember the political significance of it," he said. "People are thankful that they're free, but this first event was a life-or-death service because they were opposing the official law of the land. It was a life-or-death ritual, a risk of faith, if you will."

For Rev. Stephen John Thurston, pastor of New Covenant Missionary Baptist Church, East 77th Street and South Cottage Grove Avenue, his lasting appreciation of the Watch Night tradition grew out of an

overwhelming sense of gratitude to have survived.

"Being young and black in Chicago was something that left a cloud over your head as to whether you'd live to see another year," recalled the third-generation pastor. "With so much violence in our community and so many young people being killed, to hear my father pray and teaching us to thank God for sparing us to see another year was something that really made me grateful and thankful."

Gordon, too, recalls embracing that lesson at a Watch Night when he was 13 and had just started playing piano. His mother, the church musician, was too sick to attend Watch Night services that year, so he had to lead the worshipers in song.

When congregants rose to testify, a woman who had lost her husband and daughter in the previous year stood and thanked God for the people in her life and the will to survive.

"I wondered at that point if she really had anything to thank God for," Gordon recalled. "It didn't make sense to me. Watch Night for her served as a fulcrum, a turning point where she showed appreciation for the past and embraced a positive future.

"That celebration of survival becomes the highlight of the moment," he continued. "A prayer of thanksgiving ends up being the ending act as we go from 11:58 to 12:05. ...We're giving God glory first."

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