

Go Grow Your Church! **Spiritual Leadership for African American Congregations**

James F. Miller
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Although organized topically, with each chapter titled after a specific practice of ministry, *Go Grow Your Church!* is written as a narrative, covering the experience of Rev. James F. Miller from the time he began his pastorate at DuPage African Methodist Episcopal Church in DuPage County, Illinois until the congregation grew to over 1,000 members and moved into a new building. Mapping the events he faced at DuPage to the practices in each chapter, Miller suggests that what made the church growth DuPage experienced possible was the same thing that invigorated the various practices of ministry: effective church administration. Based on this personal history, Miller draws the conclusion that if administration can be performed with sufficient spiritual maturity and worldly savvy, then the church will be actuated for growth and excellence in the practice of ministry. To this end, Miller states that “the ministry of this book is to offer administrative advice and suggest methods that will not only explain what to do, but also show an implementation process for accomplishing the stated purpose” (20-21).

The first chapter, which starts when Miller arrived at DuPage AME, describes the process of evangelism that he deployed to grow the number of people in the

congregation. Miller terms this practice of evangelism “Closed Net Evangelism” (CNE). CNE essentially consists of preparing the members of the church to welcome new visitors to the church in such a loving and inspiring way that the visitors sense a powerful move of the Spirit in the church and want to return. Revealing the strongest suit of the book, Miller offers significant detail as to how he organizes his congregation for this work, from the way he encourages them to use bulletins as conversation pieces with unchurched friends and family to the script that follow-up callers use in contacting visitors. This detail is how Miller demonstrates the focus on administration in the book.

The second chapter begins the saga that will stretch through most of the book – that of how DuPage AME outgrew its facilities and needed to find a new building. Specifically focusing on the practice of administration, Miller discusses how he organized the congregation’s boards and lay leadership to move through the often contentious process of deciding to leave the existing church building and move to a new one. In doing this, it becomes clear that when Miller refers to administration, he is largely referring to the pastor’s job of leading the congregation. While good administration will entail creating space for lay leadership, ultimately for Miller the pastor is uniquely gifted by God to envision God’s will for the church and shepherd the congregation to be faithful to that vision. As a result, the primary job of the pastor is to organize the lay leadership in such a way that it will come around to the pastor’s vision. This may require significant patience and prayer on the pastor’s part, but Miller is convinced that the pastor will ultimately carry the day as God’s anointed messenger.

This understanding of the role of the pastor as the final authority in the church undergirds all of his suggestions and techniques.

The third chapter focuses on stewardship as Miller introduces the how he dealt with the financial issues during the growth of DuPage. In it, Miller explains that a healthy congregation is one that does not organize itself around a budget or the support of programs, but focuses on the spiritual development of the congregation. Part of this development is calling people to become tithers. Working on the assumption that greater spiritual maturity will lead to people tithing and, therefore, to greater church receipts, Miller underscores the need for administration that will emphasize financial stewardship in order to move the congregation toward tithing.

The fourth chapter picks up from the third chapter by discussing how the church can specifically raise the funds it needs. To do this Miller argues that the church must organize its calendar to maximize congregational participation and giving. This organization is accomplished by providing both times for the people in the church to celebrate – during which they give more time, money, and energy to the church – and providing times for them to replenish their resources of time, money, and energy so that they can give more at the next major celebration. He specifically handles questions of how to engage the congregation through worship in doing this.

The fifth and sixth chapters follow DuPage AME as it sells its old building, moves to temporary accommodations, seeks to purchase a site to construct a new building, secures a loan, selects an architect and contractor, erects the new building, and finally moves into that new building. Miller is candid about the struggles the church

faced during these processes, and provides exceptionally detailed explanations of how he moved forward with the church during these transitions, including outlining the documents the church submitted to apply for the loan, the ways the church structured its committees to deal with the architect, and how the church discerned where it should be located. These chapters also discuss how to organize and run a capital campaign.

Chapter seven covers how a growing church should worship. This chapter is largely based on Miller's own observations as to what worship practices "kill the Spirit" (120) and what worship practices prompt enthusiasm and return visitors. Again focusing on administration, Miller opines on issues surrounding music selection, the flow of the service, and what worship styles have become outdated, suggesting that clear guidelines should be put in place to avoid problems in each of these areas.

Chapter eight covers spiritual practices and serves as Miller's caveat that church growth can only occur if a pastor is leading the congregation to be engaged in the spiritual disciplines. This leadership first takes place by example. The reason for this, Miller asserts, is that salvation, and not numbers, should be the chief concern of the church. Notably, it is hard for Miller to hold this line, since the way he writes of the Holy Spirit tends to instrumentalize the Spirit as only an energy source or inspirational muse for bringing about the numerical growth that Miller wants to see occur.

The final chapter offers seven take-away lessons culled from the book. According to Miller, these lessons, all directed to pastors, promise to unleash the potential of their ministries to bring about growth in their congregations. Perhaps most disturbing is that

some of these lessons, such as practicing kindness, patience and acceptance, are seen as means to an end rather than ends in themselves.

This book will certainly be useful for some readers. Miller's careful exposition of how to engage in the various activities a growing church must face: such as preparing a loan application, dealing with facility issues, and navigating specific pastoral and administrative snares that inevitably arise during a capital campaign, might well provide significant guidance and even solace to pastors who find themselves in the very same situation. It would be helpful to know that someone else has been there before and has come through the situation successfully. It would be even more helpful to have the specifics of how that other church organized itself while it was still in process. This is precisely what Miller offers.

Beyond this very specific group of people who would undoubtedly benefit from the book, the broader use of this book in Christian ministry is less obvious. The primary reason for this is that the book is idiosyncratic, following the history and experiences of Miller's own tenure as pastor at DuPage AME Church. As a result, finding more general principles for application in other congregations becomes a significant chore. While Miller offers any number of ideas throughout the text that he clearly believes are one-size-fits-all principles for church growth, Miller's highly specific experience often makes it difficult for the reader to find the immediate connection between Miller's ideas and another congregational setting. In this regard, Miller's work is not as helpful as other church growth theory books based out of specific settings, such as the ubiquitous *The Purpose-Driven Church* by Rick Warren. While, like Miller, Warren develops his ideas

largely out of his specific experience at Saddleback, Warren's broader interaction with other pastors and churches have helped him differentiate between specific strategies that are useful in his own pastorate and broader principles that are more readily applied by other congregations.

Even among African-American church growth literature, Miller's work is somewhat lacking. Compared, for example, to Carlyle Fielding Stewart's *African American Church Growth*, Miller's work does not consider the specific intersection of African-American culture with ecclesiastical structures and ethics. As such, the only thing that seems to qualify the book as "African American" is that the author and congregation covered in the book are African American. This certainly shaped some of the assumptions, practices, and conclusions that are in the book, but it remains the job of the reader to try to ferret out how and why that influence is visible.

Also, as noted previously, Miller's tendency to make the Holy Spirit a subsidiary to his numerical aims, in spite of his own attempt to claim that he does not do this, is troubling. As with much church growth literature, it leaves the reader wondering if the purpose of the church is to engage in the *missio Dei* or to engage in self promotion.

In the end, Miller's book may be useful to those who are facing the very specific trials and tribulations that Miller and DuPage AME Church did, but beyond this it is not very helpful for either students or practitioners of church growth theory. At best it provides an inspirational story of how one church, in the face of some daunting challenges, was able to grow substantially under the leadership of a particular pastor.