

A Local Filmmaker Is Taking on Sex-Shaming in the Black Church

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"Purity culture doesn't teach you love," wrote Nicole, a contributor to the blog No Shame Movement, in January 2015. Rather, she said, it teaches you "almost self-hate."

She was describing being raised in African-American churches and seeing pastors have affairs with female church members. The women would disappear and the pastor would keep his job. When Nicole was 14, she saw her mother thrown out of a church because she had become pregnant with a minister's baby. And at age 20, Nicole began attending a different church as an unwed mother. She recalls feeling "glares from the pews" as she walked by during offering.

Though they're never specifically named, women like Nicole come up frequently in D. Channsin Berry's documentary *The Church House: Sexuality in the Black Church*, which screens at L.A.'s Pan African Film Festival on Feb. 7 and 8. (The festival continues through Feb. 15.)

"Young girl would get pregnant in church and she used to sing in choir. Suddenly she's pregnant. Now she can't sing in choir," says Pastor John Faison from West Grove Baptist in Nashville, more than halfway through the film. "Back in the day," the girl would have to come up in front and apologize to the whole congregation. "Now the deacon who got her pregnant was never brought up, nobody said anything," Faison adds, in frustrated disbelief. "It's the same thing today. It's the exact same thing."

Berry, who's based in L.A. and whose previous work includes *Dark Girls* (2011), about bias against darker-skinned African-American women, chose to make the documentary because he found it confounding that, still, the black church seems incapable of having open conversations about sexuality. Certainly, conservative white churches have similar sex-shaming problems, strict guidelines about marriage and an aversion to embracing homosexual congregants — just think about the Christian right's pushback against gay rights legislation and sex ed in public schools.

But sexuality has a different history in the black church, a place where African-Americans were historically able to have an intellectual and spiritual agency they couldn't have in a segregated outside world. It was a place where they weren't reduced to skin color or a hypersexualized stereotype that a dominant white culture had hung on them. So it makes sense that the sensuality-versus-spirituality divide would take on its own character.

Berry's film arrives at a moment when the push for a more honest, hard-hitting conversation about racial divides and the nuances and value of black lives is growing, even in the context of church. In May 2015, when *The Church House* was still in postproduction, Minister Ahmad Green-Hayes, who works with Black Lives Matter: NYC, started the Twitter hashtag #BlackChurchSex. It began trending within hours, people recounting abuses and excommunications, or discussing the veneration of virginity and the acceptance of only certain kinds of queerness. This inspired the Center for Black Church Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary to organize a conference, scheduled for March, called *Love Thyself*. The idea is to talk about loving, not shaming, the black body in religious spaces and discuss "trauma, healing and pleasure in tandem."

Courtesy D. Channsin Berry

When he began his film two years ago, Berry had a similar goal. He had grown up attending Presbyterian, Pentecostal and Baptist churches during his youth in New Jersey. "This documentary is such low-hanging fruit for me," he says. "I could have named names and specific churches, instances of abuse." He wasn't interested in scandal, however.

He recalls a moment early in his filming when he went to meet with a group of six or seven men in a well-appointed parlor in Washington, D.C. All of them were gay, all had grown up in black congregations. Four recounted being sexually abused in church-related contexts. "It still messes me up a bit," says Berry. "I'm trying to figure out, where's God in all of this?"

The filming process started organically. Berry would ask friends if they knew any ministers or churchgoers worth speaking with. This led him to an imam in Chicago, a conservative Baptist pastor from Nashville and a female rabbi in L.A. The sometimes-fluctuating opinions of his interviewees bleed into one another, making the film feel sort of like an open-ended essay. Early on steamy, highly produced footage of sexy, barely clad bodies engaged in foreplay is interspersed with vintage, grainy imagery of a church choir. It's an odd choice, but the discomfort it causes is weirdly apropos.

Discomfort is part of the film's point, since Berry wanted to open up conversations he saw his churchgoing peers avoiding. At one point, he intersperses footage of ministers — including Rev. George Brooks, Pastor Eugene Se'Bree and Imam Omar Muhammed — talking about homosexuality in the Bible. "Show me anywhere in the Synoptics where Christ condemns homosexuality," says Se'Bree.

"There is nothing in the text, Old or New Testaments, to give a pass to [homosexuality]," says Muhammed.

"The divine will of God is that the married relationship is between a man and a woman," says Brooks.

"Until someone can show me in the Synoptics that Christ condemned, then who am I?" asks Se'Bree. "Because Christ simply said, 'I will call who I may.'"

When Berry screened The Church House in New Jersey in late September, a number of local black ministers got together to discuss whether to boycott the film. This baffles Berry. "Why speak on something you haven't seen?" he asks. But if he noticed one pattern in filming, it was the reluctance of certain of his subjects to research or think critically about church teaching. "This rhetoric is downloaded into you. You become indoctrinated," he says.

Near the end of the film, Bishop Yvette Flund, a lesbian minister from Oakland, muses about the history of indoctrination. "The black church is a phenomenon," she says. It was a self-made, grass-roots institution, where black men had a level of authority they didn't have elsewhere. "It created an opportunity for brothers where you'd be called by your first name all day on your job but when you got to church you were Deacon So-and-son, Reverend So-and-so. Sometimes we'd make each other doctors. Not earned, just to give the title to one another," she says. It became common practice for women to accept submissive roles if it gave male leaders a greater sense of worth. But Flund also suggests that such submission led to abuses — women being shamed for pregnancies, or worse. In an effort to "literally" interpret the Bible, the church has become an enabler of oppression.

"How is a person who's a progeny of slavery, how can we ever be biblical literalists?" asks Flund. "It is in the Bible; the Bible says, 'Slaves obey your masters as you obey the Lord.'" The Bible doesn't offer freedom from slavery, she says, which means literal obedience to its tenets probably isn't the way for the black church to become a healthier, more honest institution.

Berry wants his film to be part of a healing process. "For me healing means lack of pain, an opening of consciousness and being freer to understand and move on." He continues, "I think with people of color, we need to stop trying to prove ourselves, that we are good enough to be what we're supposed to be. God didn't make a mistake with us."

The Church House: Sexuality in the Black Church, Rave Cinemas Baldwin Hills Crenshaw 15, 4020 Marlton Ave., Baldwin Hills; Sun., Feb. 7, 4:15 p.m., and Mon., Feb. 8, 1:45 p.m.; \$13. paff.org/films/the_church_house.

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• Caption: Director-producer D. Channsin Berry was confounded that conversations about sex are still taboo in the black church. Courtesy D. Channsin Berry Behind the scenes during filming of The Church House Courtesy D. Channsin Berry

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