

# Hoping to avert disaster, Democrats turn to black churches

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October 27, 2010

WASHINGTON (RNS) Facing an electoral bloodbath at the voting booth next Tuesday, Democrats are turning to a key part of their base -- African-Americans -- and are using the black church to help get voters to the polls.

In an election where Republicans appear poised to recapture the House and possibly the Senate, strong black turnout could be "the difference between a bad election and a horrible election," said David Bositis, a political analyst from the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

The concerted outreach goes beyond traditional candidate stops at black pulpits on the Sunday before Election Day. President Obama has been on the phone with black clergy, and first lady Michelle Obama was the star attraction on a conference call with thousands of African-American women.

The Democratic National Committee has dispatched staff to coordinate with black ministers as part of an aggressive get-out-the-vote mobilization, hoping to seize on early voting options in key states.

"We're making sure that not only on Sunday that pastors encourage their community to go out and vote, but even during the weekday services," said Regena Thomas, director faith and constituent outreach

for the DNC.

Thomas, who is an African Methodist Episcopal pastor from New Jersey, said African-Americans are being encouraged to vote early, even "before and after Bible study."

A recent Washington Post poll found that 80 percent of African-Americans are as or more interested in the midterm elections as they were in 2008, when they turned out in force for Obama.

Bositis, whose office researches African-Americans, called them "well-positioned to vote" this November.

Part of the pitch to black voters -- especially the black women who are the backbone of black churches -- is an appeal to stand in solidarity with the nation's first black president.

"I represent a president that has gone miles and miles in his less than two years," Thomas tells black audiences. "Would you consider looking at how far he's gone, and the fact that in order for him to continue his journey he needs a Congress, a Senate to be by his side?"

Two calls featuring the first lady, which stressed the president's first-term accomplishments, have been led by prominent black women clergy, including AME Bishop Vashti McKenzie of Tennessee and Rev. Cynthia Hale, a Georgia megachurch pastor.

The DNC is spending millions to reach black voters as part of a \$50 million campaign. Thomas said more than \$3 million will be spent on a media blitz that includes a radio ad featuring the Rev. Joseph Lowery,

the civil rights veteran who gave the benediction at Obama's inauguration.

"In 2008, we changed the guard," Lowery said in the ad airing on black radio stations. "This year, we must guard the change."

The Rev. Calvin McKinney, general secretary of the National Baptist Convention, USA, and a New Jersey pastor, said the DNC has worked with state leaders of his denomination to try to avert political disaster.

"There is, as far as we can see, an apparent movement afoot to stop the Obama agenda," said McKinney. "It has caused us to take a higher level of interest in this midterm election to secure the kind of congressional support he's going to need to advance his agenda."

The Rev. Boise Kimber, a Connecticut pastor and a board member of the National Baptist Convention, USA, said he and other black clergy were already building bridges between churches and Democratic candidates even before the DNC came calling.

In some cases, the outreach seems to be working.

"It opened my eyes to a lot," said Threasa Williams, a hair stylist in Jackson, Miss., who joined a mid-October call with Michelle Obama at the urging of her customer, AME Bishop Carolyn Tyler Guidry.

"I said, well this year what I'm going to do is go pick up some elderly people and take them to the polls so they can vote."

Todd Shaw, professor of African-American studies and political science at the University of South Carolina, said black pastors' political activism -- when they believe Obama is "politically besieged" -- could make a difference.

"That might be an effective political threat message that might at least bump some of the numbers up in the African-American community," he said. "We know particularly in South Carolina, an African-American woman who attends church regularly is the standard profile of the Democratic base."