

Upward gospel: An interview with T. D. Jakes

Cover Story in the [July 10, 2007](#) issue

Martin Luther King Jr. focused on civil disobedience and racial injustice, while your focus is on personal empowerment. Why the different focus and message?

The two missions are not comparable. Every pastor seeks to serve the needs of his constituency, some from a social perspective as it relates to social justice, and some from a personal perspective as it relates to empowerment. For example, without social justice we would not have affirmative action, but without personal responsibility we have children with affirmative-action opportunities who don't get to school. It's a combination of both messages that is the catalyst to propel our generation into what Dr. King fought for us to have.

Some have called you a successor to African-American leaders such as Booker T. Washington, Elijah Muhammad and the Rev. J. H. Jackson—all known for advocating a gospel entailing hard work and economic gain. Do you see yourself as part of that legacy?

I have a great deal of respect for those men, but I think my goal is to be myself and to be true to my own convictions, not to be the next in a lineage of other men. If I've become one of them, then that is a by-product of endeavoring to serve the needs of our community as I discern them.

Your ministry is built at least in part on a message that you originally presented to women in a Sunday school class and then delivered at conferences and through sermons and the media. What are some of the pastoral issues that are unique to black women?

I struggle with the question because you confine "issues" to black women, and I've learned that many of the chief issues for black women are related to black men—in the workplace, in the penal institutions and in the academic systems. Black men's

struggles are directly related to those of African-American females.

Some African-American church leaders are critical of the pursuit of middle-class status.

I'm not encouraging status-seeking as much as I am the seeking of opportunities. Our people are not well served when they have to go to a judicial system at the mercy of a court-appointed attorney. Our elderly are not well served when they're forced to live in a rented place instead of having the opportunity to own a home. It's not so much status that I'm concerned with as it is equal and fair opportunities. I'm not forgetting those who have been left behind, but we shouldn't discourage those who have become upwardly mobile. I'd like to think that African Americans who are more affluent can rise to the challenge and assist less affluent African Americans. But that opportunity to give "a hand up" is destroyed if those who have "the upward hand" are denied the opportunity to help others.

How has your thinking about your ministry changed over the years?

I see myself as a work in progress, as someone who is evolving. I'm still learning to understand my role in the community and the opportunities that are afforded me as well as the responsibilities. I'm learning when to speak out and when not to. To wield that responsibility effectively is a huge responsibility indeed.