



A

HOLY

WAR

ON ONE SIDE THERE'S THE STATUS QUO

—A STRONGHOLD OF PASTORS
AND PARISHIONERS THAT
BELIEVE BEING

GAY AND GODLY IS AN OXYMORON.

BUT ON THE OTHER SIDE

IS A BURGEONING BAND OF
FAITHFUL WHO BELIEVE THE

CHURCH NEEDS TO BE MORE INCLUSIVE.

WHO WILL WIN THE SOUL OF BLACK CHURCHES?

BY EMELL DERRA ADOLPHUS

Pastor Michael Nabors rises at the earliest hours of each Monday morning, usually around 5 a.m., before his wife and three youngest children awake. At 6 a.m., he leads a group of weekday worshippers in praise—on New Calvary Baptist Church's prayer hotline—using the telephone in his residential study. After a resounding "amen" to the conferenced congregation, he hangs up, allows himself one cup of coffee and waits for a "call" from God.

Men of the cloth regularly rely on dialogues with the Lord, he explains. This routine talk is sacred, and New Calvary's devout congregation will hear the highlights during next Sunday's service. Nabors, a 54-year-old native of New Jersey

and graduate of the liberal Princeton Theological Seminary—has been a pastor at the east-side church for 16 years. His sermons have always been in sync with those of other Black Baptist leaders. Never one to create controversy, he seemed to be on the same page—chapter and verse—as other pastors in their respective dialogues with the heavenly Father.

Until recently, when Nabors said God told him to come out in support of gay rights.

"Martin Luther King Jr. said, 'It's not so much the evil people who are killing and destroying this world, it's the appalling silence of the good people,'" Nabors says. "In my humble estimation, I sat on the sidelines far too long without feeling compelled to say anything." ▶

A HOLY WAR

Nabors is part of a rising change of tide in the Black church as more heterosexual religious leaders are beginning to reconcile with the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) community—who often feel unwelcome and unwanted. For some longtime worshippers, it is a celebrated spiritual awakening. Finally, some in the religious community are acknowledging and even accepting these gay sisters and brothers and welcoming into the fold. For others, this attitude shift is a holy coup and a slap in the face to long-held beliefs about being gay. Homosexuality, Nabors says, is the burning issue that will not only divide the Black church, but also the Black community.

DEFYING DEEP-SEEDED BELIEFS

Last month, a coalition of about 50 Black pastors publicly asked Gov. Rick Snyder to continue Michigan's ban on same-sex marriage during a press conference at First Baptist World Changers International Ministries in Detroit. The ruling on same-sex marriage has been put on hold, but the pastors want the idea completely struck down. They argued that God does not agree with homosexual behavior and same-sex marriage would "destroy the backbone of society," with one pastor warning, "Anybody that is an enemy of God is an enemy of mine" and "The fight is on."

The coalition represented hundreds of Christian worshippers, they announced, including Catholics, Lutherans, Pentecostals and Baptists. But the coalition did not represent Nabors.

"I said to myself, 'Do these Negroes speak for me? I am a Detroit pastor. They don't speak for me. And I don't even know who they are. And I don't know their credentials. I can't let this continue. I have a different perspective,'" he says.

In a public letter highlighted in Detroit's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender newspaper *Between The Lines*, Nabors called the traditional Black church "homophobic" and expressed his disagreement with the ministers. "I don't know of another institution in the United States that is as homophobic as the traditional Black church. And I don't see that changing right away. I see myself, and a

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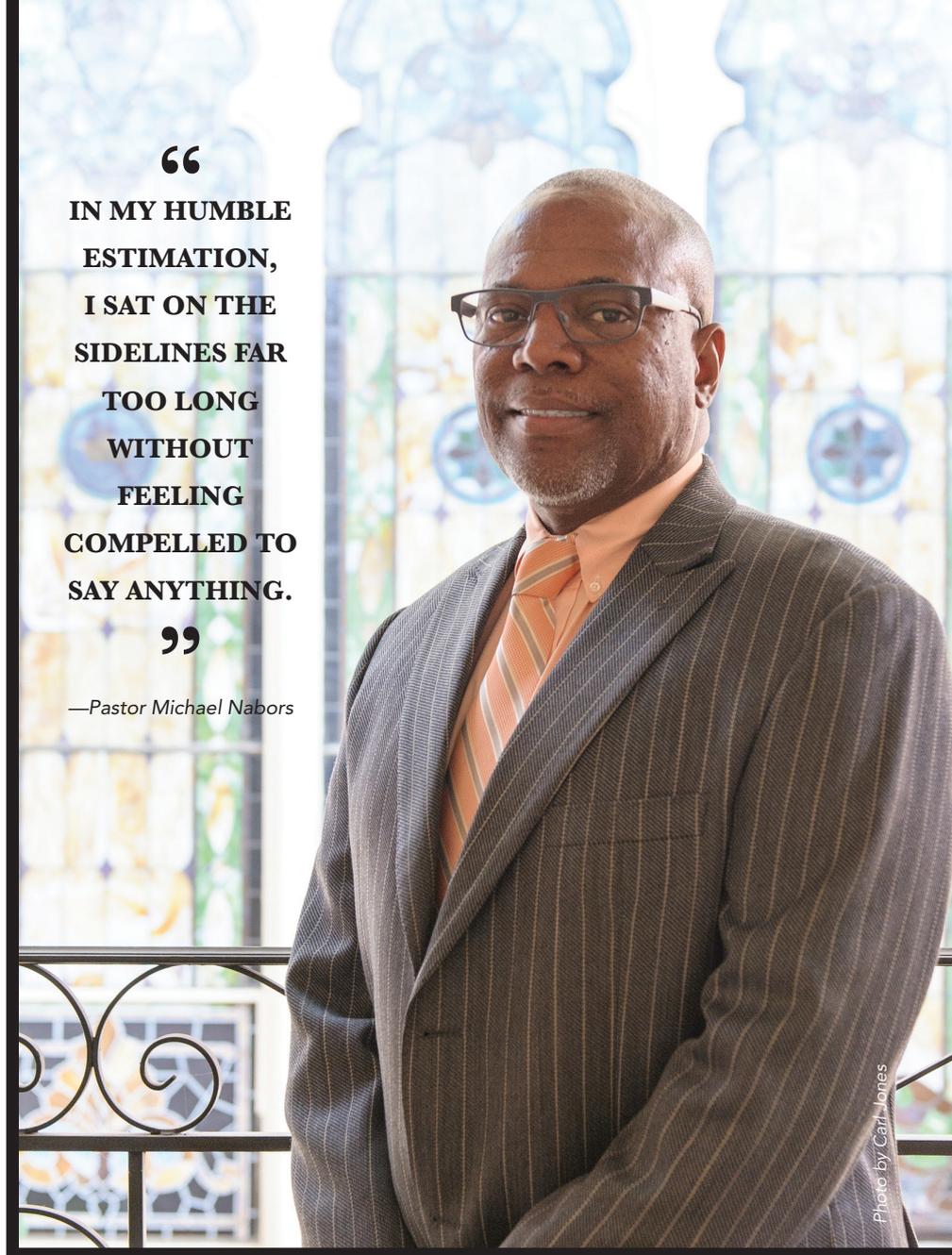


Photo by Carl Jones

few others, being isolated. Whether you want to call us pioneers or not. ... Whatever terms you use, I think we are out there with independent voices."

Response to Nabors' comments has mostly come in the form of solemn silence. Christian brethren from red states like Oklahoma question his faith: Perhaps he's been sharing a dialogue with the antichrist? Or maybe he is a false prophet—an "apostate," as they are called—a fraud. But Nabors' parishioners dutifully support his decision to go public with his stance. And while his congregation has not dwindled, there is the occasional threat on his life and church. As a result, an intricate buzzer system now gives patrons access into the 64-year-old church.

"You know, make my Facebook private," he says, with an uneasy laugh, about his own personal safety measures. "My name has

gotten out there in the Detroit community as being a supporter, so I was ready to receive all sorts of things."

A SLOWLY GROWING SHIFT

According to a Pew Research Center survey, same-sex marriage support among Black Protestants has increased from 32 percent in 2013 to 43 percent this year. Nationwide support for same-sex marriage stands at 55 percent, a steadily growing approval credited to a younger more liberal generation. Yet older, more established religious leaders are leading the tide of change in the church, such as longtime pastor E.L. Branch of Third New Hope Baptist Church of Detroit.

Branch, says Nabors, is one of several religious leaders who publicly support him.

Other pastors are unwilling to make their support public out of fear, he says.

"I support it to the degree that I wonder what's the issue," says Branch, about the LGBTQ community in the church. "Pastor Nabors is one of our gifted young preachers who I have lots of admiration for, and this only makes me admire him more for his stance on this. The LGBT community is a part of the community of faith and really, to a great degree, always have been."

Last year, Branch licensed an openly lesbian minister. And as head pastor of Third New Hope for 37 years, Branch says he can only agree with Nabors' comments, "because it is true." Explaining, he was never taught to be homophobic, but others' behaviors made it clear that it was not acceptable.

"I was not taught directly, but indirectly taught that it was wrong to be homosexual," he says, adding, "I was also taught that we are not each other's judges."

Branch says his point of "conversion" on the issue was having personal relationships with gay people.

"Dr. James Cone (professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York) said a number of years ago, 'True conversation rarely occurs without an honest encounter with a victim.' And I took from that, a lot of the times people hate folks they've never met. They've never sat and talked to them or had a conversation. And they judge them and know nothing about them. I think that's what is wrong. Just like we are (judged) as African-Americans. They thought all Black folks were the same and inferior."

UNITED AND STRONGER

Branch says that to turn away the gay community is to turn away our sons and daughters. "The more walls we can bring down, the better things will be as a church. They will also start to come down in families and communities," says Branch. "So none of these 'isms' should be allowed to survive in 2014."

Nabors foresaw the divide of the Black religious community. "About 12 years ago, I was invited to be a part of a panel that was responsible for reviewing the state of

marriages in the Black community in the United States, put on by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in Baltimore. They brought in pastors from various denominations all around the country. And we talked about the state of marriages and how can we make them healthy," he says. "About halfway through, I shared with the group that my concern was that we had not entertained the idea of homosexuality."

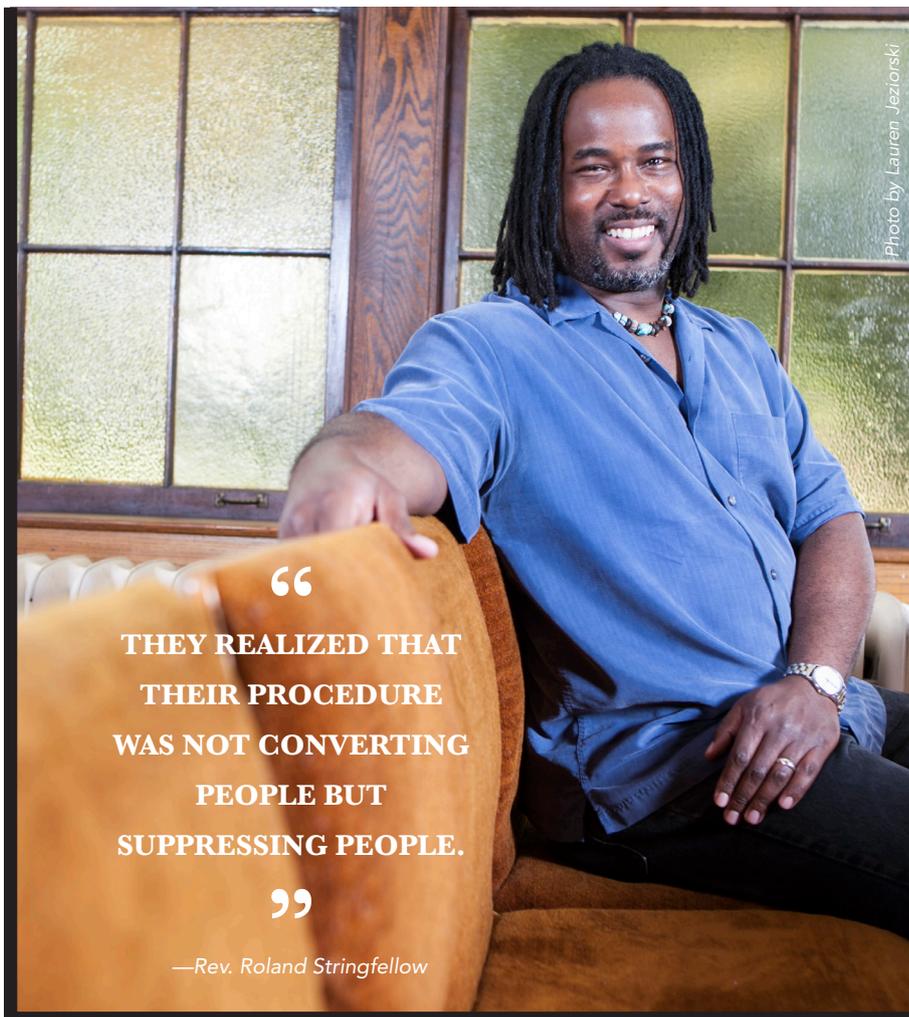
The group consisted of big Black religious educators, such as Robert Michael Franklin, former president of Morehouse College, and the Rev. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes of Colby College in Maine.

"The more I talked, the more I sensed resentment from male and female (pastors) alike," says Nabors.

AN UNFORGIVABLE OFFENSE

The church is where sinners of all offenses—adulterers, murderers, cheats—can be forgiven. But homosexuality has largely been outcast as an unforgivable offense because homosexuals want their "lifestyle" to be accepted, says the Rev. Stacy Swimp, a Flint-based pastor that was among those who protested the overturning of Michigan's same-sex marriage ban.

"We've always had homosexuals in the choirs, in our families—we just didn't talk about it," says Swimp. "Back in the day, as long as a brother could sing and he was on the down-low with it, we did not say anything. Even though we knew." ▶



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The idea is not to reconcile homosexuals with individuals, says Swimp, but with the words of God.

"Reconciliation to the church means reconciliation to Jesus Christ, not to the people. And so the pastors that are saying that, I will submit to you, they are apostates. They are false teachers. They are false prophets," Swimp says. "They are not speaking God's truth. They are speaking to what we call 'itchy ears.' They are telling people what they want to hear. ... We don't give license to sin because it is now popular in society."

Swimp admits that the church could be more compassionate in its conviction. He says he has noticed other faiths "seem to be growing at a faster pace than our Christian faith" because of a greater need of compassion for the sinner.

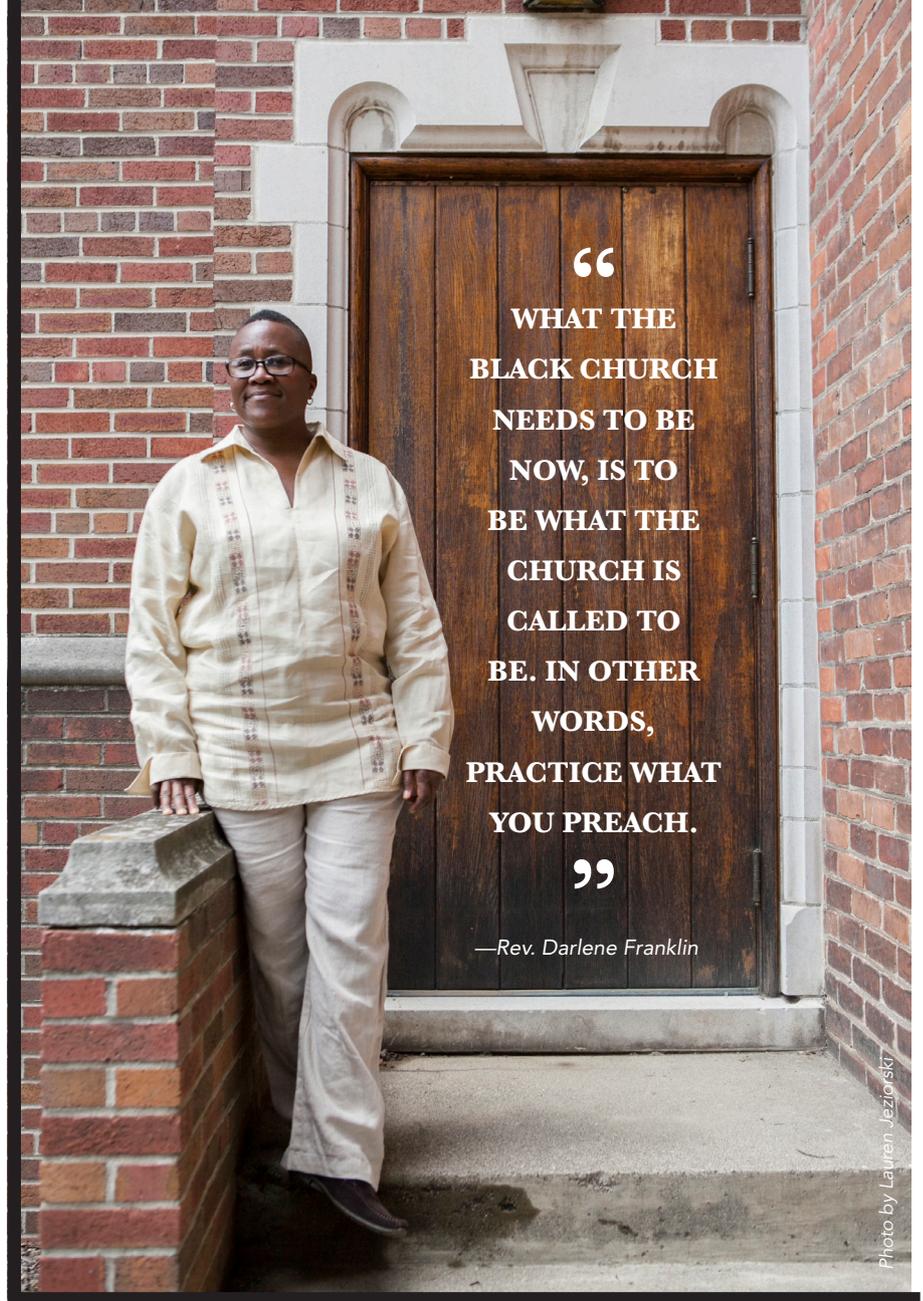
"I do believe that because everyone is shaped in iniquity, that it is very possible or very probable that a person can be predisposed to the orientation of lesbianism or homosexuality. There is no doubt in my mind that from an emotional psychological perspective, that person could be more predisposed. I do not believe it is genetic per se, because if I say it is genetic, then that means it can't be stopped. It can't be changed. It can't be reborn through a relationship with Jesus Christ. How many times have you heard that somebody was more predisposed to being an alcoholic because their daddy was that way? So people are predisposed to all kinds of things for all kinds of reasons."

CHANGING THROUGH GOD

A successful example of a predisposed individual healed through a relationship with Jesus Christ, says Swimp, is author Janet Boynes—a former lesbian who now runs a ministry of conferences for others looking to heal their homosexuality. The process is widely called "gay repair."

At the other end of the spectrum is the Rev. Roland Stringfellow of the universally-inclusive Metropolitan Community Church of Detroit (MCCD) in Ferndale, whose homosexual exorcism was unsuccessful.

"I went to a Pentecostal church to have the spirit of homosexuality cast from me. And I went to the altar, and they laid hands on me and yelled out: 'Demon of homosexual-



ity, come out of this man.' And smacked me on the forehead and I fell out. And people assumed I was slain in the spirit. But I was slain in embarrassment," says Stringfellow.

The largest gay repair organization, Exodus International, closed last year after a public apology from its leader Alan Chambers over the "pain and hurt" the organization has caused nationally. The company was reborn as Speak. Love., an organization dedicated to create a safe place to speak about faith, gender and sexuality.

"They realized that their procedure was not converting people but suppressing people," says Stringfellow. "Anything can be suppressed."

COMING TOGETHER

At the MCCD—where gay means "God Adores You"—the pews are full every Sunday

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—Rev. Darlene Franklin

with worshippers who are happy to have a space where they can praise the Lord and be themselves. The Rev. Darlene Franklin is one of them.

"I've known I was a lesbian since 7 years old, but they did not call it that," says Franklin. "You were a bulldagger."

Franklin, one of Nabors' students in seminary school, became a member at Full Truth Fellowship Church in 1993. The Detroit ministry was a popular staple in the gay community for its work in reaching out to those suffering from HIV/AIDS.

"In Detroit, that was the church to go to," says Franklin, who served as head pastor at the church for 10 years, starting in 2001. "Seventeen years in this community living out loud as a clergy pastor in the city of Detroit. It was really something, to say the least; an interesting life."

Franklin confesses that she felt as if God “played a trick” on her when she heard her own calling as a reverend.

“I was in a prayer circle one day and the prayer ministers said all lesbians and homosexuals are going to hell. Now, it wasn’t that I had not heard that before in that particular church, but on that particular day, I had just come out to my children the day before. So here my 11-year-old is looking at me like, ‘my mom is going to hell.’ So I left that church,” says Franklin.

Leaving the church was her most difficult decision, she says, because her faith is what kept her strong.

“I’ve lived that in the raw. For in our community, (church) is all that we have. That is what we own. That is what directs our life. And so I think what the Black church needs to be now, is to be what the church is called to be. In other words,

practice what you preach,” says Franklin.

“But the crux of my 20 years in this community has been that I don’t think we should have to separate ourselves from the main church to become a separate specifically LGBTQ church congregation. We are the body of Christ, and the church is to be that entity where all people are welcome. I think what’s emerging is that one church for all people. And it’s tough and I think that is what pastor Nabors has struggled with. And is walking toward that light because he says that is what God requires.”

Nabors says he is ready to do battle in any intellectual war over the scripture.

“Because I will eat a Negro up if they come at me intellectually with an issue like this. I will. I think God has just prepared that for me in terms of my own education and my own background. So if you want to engage in a hermeneutical examination of the text itself.

Let’s go to Leviticus. Let’s go to Romans.

Let’s go to 1 Corinthians and let’s talk about those texts that denounce homosexuality. But let’s do it not just by reading the text at face value. Let’s go into the historical and social context of why each of those were written and how they were written,” Nabors says.

“I am not willing to say that everybody within the church that is anti-gay, anti-lesbian are just evil and wrong,” he explains. “They just have not been educated. I am ready to critique the social infrastructure of the church and the people who are leaders of the church. More than I am (ready) to critique the masses of people in the church who are homophobic. Because you just weren’t born that way.” **B**

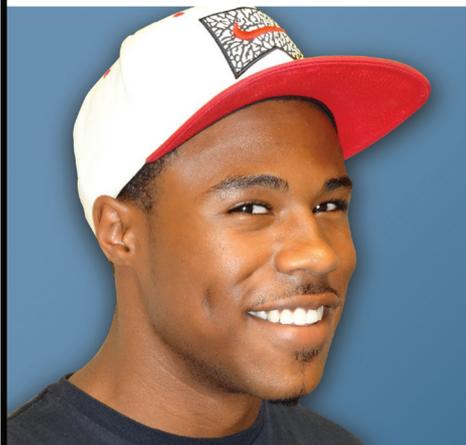
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