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Regional

Weissinger studies impact of black churches

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

The historical association between the black church and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s has long been known. However, many people are unaware that these churches continue to play other important roles in society today.

"Folks outside the black community may not be aware of just how deeply this institution plays in the lives of individuals," said Sandra Weissinger, an assistant professor in the department of sociology and criminal justice at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. "I'm also wondering if folks within black communities, even members of these churches, really have a good understanding of the historical context in which activism came from these institutions."

Born in East Orange, N.J., Weissinger obtained her bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees in sociology from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

She said that she became interested in sociology while a very young woman after seeing seniors having to work very hard long after retirement age. She became intrigued by this and other sociological phenomena.

Weissinger recently published a book titled "A Sociology of Black Clergy in the State of Illinois," based on her research of predominately black churches throughout the state. In her study she found that these churches still have great power when it comes to social change.

"For this book, I went to three different areas of Illinois that were rather different," she said. "One church that I really admired had a group of folks who were working in the heart of one of the most impoverished and dangerous neighborhoods, and these folks still carried that legacy of activism forward."

She, however, also found many of the churches actually promoting inequality in other social arenas, particularly those involving gender. She recalled one pastor whose sermons oftentimes talked about the proper – subordinate – role of women.

"Congregations are mostly made out of women," she said. "It was interesting to me that nobody would shout out at the pastor, 'Hey you are wrong about that!'" Another issue she brings up in her book is that some of these churches foment a form of elitism. In one town she visited there were about 20 churches in a neighborhood where coal tar had leaked from underground containers and had made many people sick.

"When I talk about elitism, I'm saying that even though the church was in the middle of a predominantly black community that really could have used the help, and even with their connections with politicians, they decided that they were not going to speak about their societal problems," she said. "They did not see it as their concern. That was shocking to me. The idea the pastor passed on to the congregation was that they needed to work harder, to look for other jobs and that their poverty was their fault. That's what I'm talking about when I speak about elitism."

Another major role played by black churches is in disseminating information. Weissinger found different styles of communication among the different pastors.

"If the pastor was traditionalist, he would just talk about their souls and about the Bible," she said. "But if he was more militant, he would take

on this role of spreading information, whether about voter registration or a toy drive for kids in the community. Whatever they disseminated had much to do with their own political standing." She also found that congregations were drawn to particular churches based on socioeconomic factors.

"If there was a new middle class group that came up from being working class, they would be drawn to certain pastors," she said. "The poor blacks were drawn to others. But did we see integration? No, not so much."

One wonders how her students, who are of many races, react when learning these facts.

"They are tickled. I actually had a student the other day say to me, 'I don't know about you Sandra. Half the time I enjoy this class and half the time I can't stand it because it makes me angry.' Now, it's not that I make them angry, but it's the subject matter that makes them angry. Just like in this book, I don't make anything sweet or romanticize it," Weissinger said about her classes. "I show them all of the dirt and sometimes that's confusing. So, when I get up and I lecture I do get lots of questions. They are interested but there are no clear-cut answers."

Weissinger is now moving into studying the role that historically black colleges and universities play in African-American communities. "I would think that the second major institution, apart from the church, that plays a major role in these communities are these colleges."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.



Photo by Florence Maätita

Dr. Sandra Weissinger holding her latest book.