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## **Legacy of Howard Chapel Endures; Even as Services Move to School Auditorium, Speakers Stay Keenly Aware of Past**

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For more than a century, Andrew Rankin Memorial Chapel at Howard University hosted Sunday services that drew national and international dignitaries, iconic African American leaders and legendary pastors and religious scholars who talked, preached or sought to inspire.

At 11 a.m. on Sunday mornings, Nobel Peace Prize laureates Martin Luther King Jr. and Desmond Tutu preached from the pulpit. Frederick Douglass, the freed slave turned abolitionist leader, did too. So did W.E.B. DuBois, an author, scholar and NAACP founding member, and fellow early 20th-century leader Mary McLeod Bethune, who founded the National Council of Negro Women.

Presidents John F. Kennedy and Bill Clinton spoke at the chapel, as did most of the 20th century's legendary black pastors and scholars, names like Samuel Proctor, Vernon Johns and Gardner Taylor, the latter awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

But no longer.

Just 90 feet long and 50 feet wide, the chapel, whose attendance languished in the 1970s, is now outgrowing its gothic architecture and historic confines. Since 2002, so many people have begun turning out each Sunday that the nondenominational services now have to be held in 1,500-seat Cramton Auditorium -- a nice enough venue, but just not quite the same.

"It's such an irony that we've outgrown the chapel that when I open the services now, I'll say 'Welcome to the Andrew Rankin Chapel here in Cramton Auditorium,' " said Bernard L. Richardson, a professor at Howard Divinity School and only the fourth dean of the chapel in the school's history. "There's a sense of history in the chapel; it's something you can feel when you walk in."

Taylor, who is regarded by his peers as one of the greatest black preachers of the past century, misses the days when he could preach at Rankin.

"Cramton accommodates more people, which has its own virtue, but it lacks the atmosphere that Rankin has, and there's just no way to reproduce that," he said in a telephone interview from his New York home. "There's a certain aura, a certain brightness, a certain

sanctity, around Rankin."

Given the central role of the church in traditional African American life, and given Howard's role as a historically black university in the nation's capital, the campus chapel was always likely to be a cultural touchstone. But over the decades, so many history-makers spoke from the pulpit, and so many of the legal battles during the civil rights movement were developed through Howard, that the echoes of those days seem to linger in the bricks and mortar of the building itself.

"When I was a freshman and the services were still at Rankin, you had to get there at least 10 minutes before 11 or you would be in a basement, watching the service on closed-circuit television," said Daniel Blakemore, now a junior and president of the Howard University Student Government Association. "I think the bulk of our students arrive with some sort of religious belief, but the service reaches out to people who might come every Sunday, or once a month, or just for a special speaker."

Attendance at the services, limited to 550 or so in the chapel, virtually always exceeds 1,000 and frequently fills the 1,500-seat auditorium, Richardson said.

The growth in attendance by students, faculty members, alumni and people in the community is a testament in part to the chapel's impressive roster of speakers, but there is also a renewed flowering of spirituality -- if not church attendance -- on college campuses nationwide, a study showed last year.

The Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA reported in a nationwide study that although regular church attendance dropped off from 52 percent to 29 percent of all students between their freshmen and junior years, more than half still said it was "essential" that they incorporate spirituality into their daily lives.

"You can't measure spirituality by the numbers of people sitting in church each Sunday," said Kevin Kruger, associate executive director of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. The organization, which is based in Washington, D.C., tracks student issues at more than 1,500 colleges or universities. "The heart of this is an identity issue: Students are figuring out who they are, and spirituality is part of that."

At Rankin, the lineup of speakers drawing crowds this semester sounds like a roll call of some of the most prominent African American theologians, preachers and social leaders.

Author and social critic Michael Eric Dyson was the first speaker of the year. Next was Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., the legendary senior pastor of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ. February brought Renita Weems, author of an influential series of books and scholarship on women's role in the church. Charles Adams of Detroit's Hartford Memorial Baptist Church came, and so did Calvin O. Butts III, pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, where Adam Clayton Powell rose to prominence.

The semester ends with a talk by Vernon Jordan, former adviser to President Clinton.

The first time Weems spoke at Rankin several years ago, she remembers looking out at the sea of faces and realizing the importance of the forum she held.

"I remember hearing folks like Dr. Gardner Taylor, Rev. Willie Barrow [of Operation PUSH], Marian Wright Edelman and Eleanor Holmes Norton when I was younger, and I remember the tremendous impact hearing them made on my life," she said in an e-mail interview from

her office at Spelman College in Atlanta, where she is the Camille and William Cosby Visiting Professor of Humanities. "And now I have reached the age and attained wisdom enough to become one of them to a young person sitting in the audience listening to me."

Ron Hopson, an associate professor of psychology and divinity at Howard, used his sermon last semester to critique the best-selling book "The Prayer of Jabez," which, he said, has been misinterpreted from its original meaning: a prayer for the oppressed.

The chapel's history of legendary speakers didn't tie his tongue, he said, but it was on his mind when he stood to speak.

"There's really been a prophetic voice from there," he said. "It's an auspicious lineage, and you're mindful of that."

Still, the chapel hasn't always been packed. In the mid-1970s, recalls the Rev. Darryl F. James, then a political science major at Howard, "you could find a seat at any time. You could count the students who went."

Now the rector of Messiah-St. Bartholomew Episcopal Church on the south side of Chicago, he came back to Howard for homecoming last year. He was amazed at the chapel crowd.

"It's gone through a complete metamorphosis," he said.

Many people interviewed for this story attribute the change to the leadership of Richardson. Dean of the chapel for the past decade, Richardson brings in the speakers, coordinates events with the array of religious organizations on campus, organizes outreach programs and lends a grace note to the services.

"Nobody can pray like Dean Richardson," said Nadine Eads, a Howard alumna who now teaches at the university.

Richardson, instead, attributes the crowds to a change in the spiritual climate on campus.

"Students are more open and expressive about their religious convictions," he said. "Before, it was more of a private matter. Today, for many students, it's the basis for their politics, for their social life, for everything."

One of those students is Freda Henry, president of the Religious Fellowship Council, an umbrella organization of more than 30 religious groups on campus. A junior English major from Milwaukee, she said she misses the warm confines of Rankin chapel each Sunday and longs for a new, larger home for the school's religious life.

"You can worship in any setting, of course, and you don't have to have a chapel and a Sunday morning," she said. "But at the same time, there's such a clear need for a larger chapel. You can go to Cramton each Sunday morning and see that the demand is there."