

The Pastor's Pen

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When we dig into the many facets of racial injustice, we unearth various and sundry unfortunate, but not surprising realities. A case in point is the Black funeral directors of America.

An article by Tiffany Stanley in *The Atlantic* entitled, ***The Disappearance of a Distinctively Black Way to Mourn***, discusses one of these underreported realities, the disappearance of the Black funeral home. Stanley notes: *For more than a century, Black funeral directors have been serving Black communities in the United States, keeping African American funeral traditions alive. But now those institutions, which withstood segregation and prospered through it, are struggling to survive as market forces change. The largest Black trade group in the industry, the National Funeral Directors & Morticians Association, or NFDMA, does not track the number of Black-owned funeral homes in the U.S. But the organization's director, Carol Williams, says its membership is shrinking—today, the NFDMA represents 1,200 members, compared to a reported 2,000 members in 1997. Many, she says, cannot afford to keep their doors open. Black funeral traditions are distinctive from other burial rituals in American culture. Funeral directors have long preserved the African American tradition of home goings, as these Christian ceremonies are often called: Bodies are typically viewed in an open casket, and a richly adorned one at that, with large floral arrangements and ornate fabrics. There are limousines and nice cars to escort families, which lends a sense of pride and pageantry to the lengthy rituals.*

Stanley goes on to point out that the untimely and tragic nature of Black deaths, going back to the Middle Passage, the severity of slavery, and more recently, the homicides in so many communities have made funeral rites an important tradition within Black communities. According to Suzanne E. Smith, author of **To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death**, funerals were places where Blacks organized and planned revolts. In 1800, in Richmond, Virginia, a slave named Gabriel plotted a revolt at a child's funeral service which led to a crackdown on Blacks conducting any services where the master was not present.

After the Civil War, the entire funeral industry went from private family ceremonies to professionally assisted events. During this period, in spite of the violence of Reconstruction, Black morticians used this cultural development as a way to become entrepreneurs. *The funeral industry created a class of African American millionaires*, as Smith notes in her book. In 1953, ***Ebony*** magazine headlined an article, **Death is Big Business**, declaring that *Negro undertakers gross more than \$120 million for 150,000 [Black] funerals each year*. Also, the funeral industry played a key role in the Civil Rights movement. The funerals of Emmet Till and Medgar Evers became focal points for the cries of injustice throughout the Black community.

It is lamentable that the recent phenomena of corporate funeral organizations and their takeovers of privately owned establishments have made the survival of Black funeral homes increasingly untenable.

As we continue to lift our vision of **Being the Voice of Justice for the Black Church**, we must never forget that injustice like the Greek mythological serpent, Hydra, is a many-headed beast.