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## African-American churches: Women feeling the Spirit take some by surprise

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• African-American churches

# Women feeling the Spirit take some by surprise

By Kathryn Ritchie  
Maine Campus staff

When Cheryl Townsend Gilkes was a little girl, she leaned over to her mother in their normally sedate, traditional New England church one day to ask why Mrs. Sinclair was shouting.

"She feels the Spirit," her mother explained in a whisper. Gilkes marveled at the older woman's curious behavior at the time, but now smiles in understanding.

"If Mrs. Sinclair shouted, they knew that God had been in that church," said Gilkes, an associate professor of African-American studies and sociology at Colby College. She spoke about the Spirit and women in the church to a diverse gathering at the Bangor Theological Seminary Thursday.

James Varner, president of the Bangor chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, joked that as a child he was frightened when his mother felt the Spirit "because she might flail her arms out and hit me." He said in his church people would circle around the women to keep them from hurting themselves when the Spirit visited, and asked Gilkes if similar behavior scared children away from religion.

"For someone not socialized in this tradi-

tion, it's absolutely terrifying," she said, adding that socializing children makes these people less threatening.

While she read from the first chapter of her book, "That Blessed Book," which is a work in progress, she peppered the evening with religious anecdotes and prayers.

Gilkes said slave masters used to offer to pay slaves not to shout while practicing their religion, but to no avail.

"Every time I feel the Spirit, master, you don't have any control over that," quoted Gilkes from a song, adding, "The Spirit has ultimate authority."

Gilkes, a minister, said women play an important role in the church, teaching children the Bible in Sunday school and appearing in a number stories in the Bible.

"Women in African-American churches are often the principal agents of the folk vernacular surrounding the Spirit," Gilkes said.

An audience member asked Gilkes about how blacks feel when whites go to their churches. Gilkes said it's not that blacks don't want them in the church, it's that white people usually don't dress as formerly for church as they do. She said it might be tempting to think everyone in a church is middle class because they are so dressed up, but that's not the

case—she's seen homeless people make every effort to find a decent wardrobe just so they could attend church.

She ended the night on a positive note. "I've got a right, you've got a right, we've all got a right to the tree of life."



Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, professor of African-American studies and sociology at Colby College, speaks at the Bangor Theological Seminary Thursday. (Dave Gagne Photo.)