**Black CHURCH, Inc.**

The Prophets of Profit

Producer/ Director Todd Williams

**IN THE BEGINNING…**

*The plaintive, impassioned wail of a gospel tenor fills the church as the camera drifts over rows of pews. The singer has one hand stretched to the heavens; the other, grips the pew. It’s a timeless and powerful expression of devotion and faith that is uniquely analogous to the black church.*

Black Church, Inc. is an investigative documentary that examines the black church and its relationship with the black community. The film will track the church’s post-slavery genesis to its modern day cultural relevance, focusing on the new breed of clergy and congregation that has spawned the prefix of “mega”, i.e. mega-church and mega-pastor.

For centuries the black church has served as a sanctuary for African-Americans. Following the Civil War, it functioned as a social welfare organization, providing health care, building schools, and establishing orphanages. As a result, black churches fostered strong community relations by providing spiritual and political leadership, especially during the civil rights movement.

From this legacy sprang a tradition of social activism. In the 50’s and 60’s pastors Ralph David Abernathy, Wyatt T. Walker and Dr. Martin Luther King championed social causes like the Civil Rights movement and denounced the Vietnam War.

In the 70’s and 80’s, Black preachers provided leadership, encouraged education and economic growth. For most black leaders, churches became a place to connect with voters and advance political goals.

**THE NEW BREED…**

Today, there has evolved a new breed of pastor. Some of this new breed of pastors are activists such as Rev Taharka Robinson, Rev. Al Sharpton and Pastor Raphael Warnock. And some others have taken the pastor/celebrity route such as Rev. Eddie Long, Rev. Creflo Dollar and Rev. T.D. Jakes.

We will tell the stories of these pastoral types. Included in our cast of characters will be the humble working class preacher who seeks no financial gain or material goods, but preaches only for the glory of God. Unlike the others, this preacher works a day job to keep the lights on at his one-room temple. He cuts the grass at the church, cooks and cleans for its elderly members, sometimes even picks them up for Sunday service. He’s on the spiritual frontlines, living among his congregants, helping them scratch out a living as they face escalating unemployment and in many cases foreclosure and homelessness. By focusing on the preacher/parishioner relationship, we underscore the basic tenets of Christianity: “By serving your fellow man, you serve God.”

Juxtaposed against the extravagant lives of mega-preachers this story thread will be powerful and damning. This elite class of clergy know little or nothing about the daily grind of working-class life. In fact, they live a life akin to a Wall Street banker.

Affectionately known as televangelists, they shepherd flocks with memberships numbering in the tens of thousands and their houses of worship resemble a big-box store or stadium, hence the term: mega-church. In recent years mega-churches have sprouted up like Starbucks on Main Street, selling their brand of get rich quick schemes, called “Prosperity Preaching.”

Meet Atlanta preacher Creflo Dollar. He’s known to extol the virtue of prosperity preaching, saying “God wants you to be rich. Let me show you how.” Bishop Eddie Long has built his ministry on a strong message of conservative Christianity that includes promises of prosperity.T.D. Jakes of Dallas’ Potter’s House, lectures on “Divine Purpose” while operating a lucrative business that sells, DVDs, books, and also produces Christian themed films.

Indeed, the gospel of prosperity is a lucrative racket that generates millions. Some of those millions fund church outreach programs, schools, food-banks, assisted living facilities and ex-offender re-entry programs. While the efforts to combat social ills are noble, the money to fund these programs are minimal compared to the millions spent on lavish lifestyles for the pastor and his family. Many mega-churches operate like corporate franchises with health care plans, bonuses and cushy salaries. And while African-Americans struggle through the lingering effects of the Great Recession of 2008, mega-churches continue to raise hundreds of millions of dollars to fund their pastor’s exorbitant lifestyle.

**TAXATION OR NO TAXATION, THAT IS THE QUESTION…**

The status of The Black Church presents a moral quandary. Should there be a salary cap? Are mega-churches abusing their tax-exempt status? Perhaps.

Enter the venerable six-term Republican Iowa Senator Chuck Grassley who in 2007 called into question the extravagant spending of mega-churches given their tax-exempt status. He sent letters to six ministries — including Jakes, Long and Dollar -- requesting specific financial records. In the official congressional letters Grassley cited a number of financial abuses, such as exorbitant salaries, cash payments to ministers (called "love offerings") and expensive trips to Hawaii and the Fiji Islands.

To be fair these pastors are not stealing from their congregants. Church members embrace the pastor’s mindset freely donating their hard earnings to clergy’s cars and dream homes all while they themselves and other congregants live in inadequate housing and take public transportation to church. Interviews with mega-church members will be critical here.

Other religious institutions have similar practices. In the Mormon faith, church doctrine dictates LDS members are to pay "one-tenth of all their interest annually” (“tithing”) to the church. That money is pumped into the church’s various corporate holdings. The Church of Scientology, Nation of Islam and Jehovah’s Witnesses all utilize the same prayer-for-profit model.

**profits and losses…**

We will delve into the murky waters of “Tax Exempt” status. How is it possible that mega-churches can generate hundreds of millions in revenue but none of it is taxed? All 50 US states and the District of Columbia exempt churches from paying property tax. Donations to churches are tax-deductible.

Since the founding of America, churches have enjoyed a special tax-exempt status. It didn’t become official however, until 1954 when churches were given a special designation "501c3 tax-exempt religious organizations”. Leading the charge was then Texas Senator, and later, President Lyndon B. Johnson, who pushed for a provision in the tax code to allow for churches to receive non-profit status. By ramming through legislation, Johnson effectively neutralized any political agenda a pastor may have because speaking out against government policies could jeopardize your tax-exempt status. Consequently, tax code 501c3 muzzled progressive pastors. Once more it created a de facto “church and state” government, further undermining the free speech rights of religious organizations.

As controversy continues to swirl around these ministries, we’re faced with some hard questions. Should taxpayers be subsidizing religious institutions? Could these ministers have amassed this kind of outlandish wealth if their churches were forced to submit tax returns? Better yet, should a progressive tax be impose on luxury items, such as jets and expensive cars? Our cast of ministers and preachers chime in on these weighty issues.

We will conclude with closing statements from clergy, politicians, community leaders, journalists and parishioners on what they see as the future of the black church and is this mega-pastor/celebrity a current trend or a pattern that will be carried on by generations of pastors to come.

**CHARACTERS:**

Rev. Al Sharpton, National Action Network, New York, NY

Senator Chuck Grassley (R) Iowa

Minister Taharka Robinson -- Brooklyn, NY

Pastor Otto Duncan – New Orleans, LA

TJ – Web Blogger (Pimp Preacher.Com) – New Orleans, LA

Ole Anthony, Trinity Group – Trinity Group, non-profit watchdog group

Rev. Creflo Dollar, World Changers Church International, Atlanta, GA

Rev. T.D. Jakes, Potter’s House, Dallas, TX

Bishop Eddie Long, New Birth Missionary Baptist Church, Atlanta, GA

Rev. Herbert Daughtry, House of the Lord Church, Brooklyn, NY