



PRESS RELEASE

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WSRE to air documentary on history and culture of the Black church

“The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song” to air Feb. 16 and 17



PENSACOLA, Fla., Jan. 29, 2021 — “The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song” will premiere Feb. 16 and 17 at 8 p.m. CST on the WSRE PBS channel. This four-hour, two-part series, from executive producer Henry Louis Gates Jr., traces the 400-year-old story of the Black church in America. WSRE will repeat the series on Feb. 18 and 19 at 4 p.m. and air it in its entirety on Sunday, Feb. 28, starting at 1 p.m.

Through interviews with renowned participants, viewers will be transported by songs and preaching styles and by the beliefs and actions that drew African Americans from the violent margins of society to the front lines of change.

For many, the Black church is their house of worship. For some, it is ground zero for social justice. For others, it is a place of transcendent cultural gifts from the soulful voices of preachers and congregants to the sublime sounds of gospel music. For the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., going to church in America also was “the most segregated hour” of the week.

The churches are also a world within a world, where Black Americans can be themselves, and the epicenter of the freedom struggle that revolutionized the United States across slavery and abolition, Reconstruction, Jim Crow and the Great Migration, and the civil rights movement.

“Our series is a riveting and systematic exploration of the myriad ways in which African Americans have worshipped God in their own images, and continue to do so today, from the plantation and prayer houses, to camp meetings and store-front structures, to mosques and mega-churches,” said Gates, the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor at Harvard University and director of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research.

“This is the story and song our ancestors bequeathed to us, and it comes at a time in our country when the very things they struggled and died for — faith and freedom, justice and equality, democracy and grace — all are on the line. No social institution in the Black community is more central and important than the Black church,” Gates said.

This PBS special is a production of McGee Media, Inkwell Media and WETA Washington, D.C.

PART ONE – Premieres Tuesday, Feb. 16 at 8 p.m. on WSRE PBS

Host Henry Louis Gates Jr. explores the roots of African American religion, beginning with the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the extraordinary ways enslaved Africans preserved and adapted their faith practices under the brutal realities of human bondage. As Protestant Christianity spread in the 18th century, Black Americans embraced a vision of a liberating God and Black churches that would become bedrock institutions in the long struggle to dismantle slavery, culminating in the Civil War. With Emancipation and Reconstruction, independent Black churches flourished and helped the formerly enslaved navigate a perilous freedom by fulfilling the social, educational, financial, cultural and political needs of African Americans. Gates speaks with noted scholars, public figures and religious leaders about faith and the struggle for rights in the midst of growing racial violence that would continue well into the 20th century. Key figures include founder Richard Allen and preacher Jarena Lee of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; abolitionist Frederick Douglass; influential religious figure Henry McNeal Turner; and pioneers Virginia Broughton and Nannie Helen Burroughs of the National Baptist Convention.

PART TWO – Premieres Wednesday, Feb. 17 at 8 p.m. on WSRE PBS

The series continues with the Black church expanding its reach to address social inequality and minister to those in need, from the exodus out of the Jim Crow South during the Great Migration to the heroic phase of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. After the violent losses of leaders like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., many Black churches found themselves struggling to remain relevant in an era of increasing secularization while reckoning with urgent social and cultural issues within their congregations and broader communities. The series brings the story of the Black church up to the present — a time of renewed struggle for racial justice in America. Host Henry Louis Gates Jr. interviews prominent figures across African American society, including celebrities Oprah Winfrey, Jennifer Hudson and John Legend; Bishops Michael Curry, Yvette Flunder and Vashti Murphy McKenzie; Rev. William Barber and others.

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About WSRE

WSRE is a PBS member station, licensed to the Pensacola State College District Board of Trustees. Since 1967, WSRE has served Northwest Florida and South Alabama with educational and entertaining programs and community engagement activities. WSRE produces, acquires and distributes programs that address local interests and reflect the diverse characteristics of the coverage area and connects local schools and families to PBS educational resources.