

# OP/ED



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## Are We Living in A Moral Sewer?



**Calvin Michael Smith**  
Guest Columnist

Back in 2008, Pat McCrory during his tenure as mayor of Charlotte, stated during an interview that (and I paraphrase), "Many African-Americans live in a moral sewer."

The sad part about it is that he's right. I've been incarcerated for 15 years and during that 15 year span, I became socially, politically, self, culturally and spiritually conscious, which has caused me to become very observant of people. As I observe my young brothers repeatedly come and go from prison, I cannot help but to notice how unconscious and disoriented they are and it makes me feel sad and angry to see my young brothers in such a wretched mental condition.

The majority of the young and many older brothers in prison that I observe glamorize things that are of no worth, things that hinder a positive growth and development for themselves. Many of them can recite verbatim a whole rap CD, but

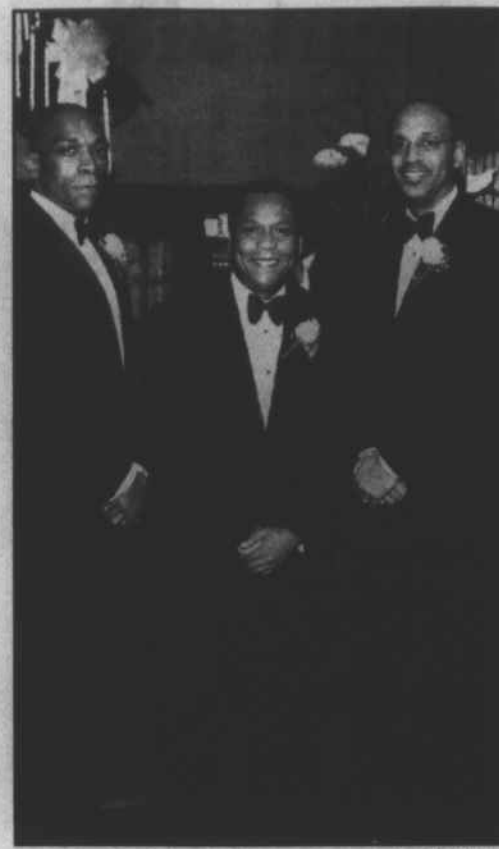
can't write their own letters home. These brothers know more about Jay-Z and Beyonce' than they know about their own family tree. They sit around and call one another the "N word" all day, yet their vocabulary consists of only 20-25 derogatory words. The officers have to constantly tell them to pull their pants up. There are even men in their 40s walking around with their pants sagging. A few weeks ago, a group of young brothers fasted for rapper Lil' Wayne's birthday.

My young brothers don't care or know about all the doors that have been opened for them by African-Americans who laid down their lives. They have no earthly idea who they are as an individual person, absolutely no knowledge of self. Whoever the hottest rapper is at the time that is who they become.

In the book entitled, "Soledad Brother," George Jackson stated, "Many, being born into poverty and never experiencing any objective basis for expectation, had the effect of being prepared for the progressively traumatic misfortunes that lead so many black men to prison. Many were already prepared for prison; it only required minor psychic adjustments."

What can be done to save a generation that respects nothing, not even themselves? A generation that when an innocent man, woman or child gets mistakenly shot and killed, they glamorize the shooter. So, for those of you who may read this and know that you are living in a moral sewer, I ask yourself the questions that Bishop T. D. Jakes once asked his congregation, "Who are you really? Who are you when nobody is looking? That is the real you. Who are you when the camouflage is off, when you don't have an ego to defend, when you have nothing to prove in the streets or the club? Who are you when you're not concerned about who is driving the nicest cars, who owns the biggest house, or who has the most money? Who are you aside from all the imitations of life?"

*Calvin Michael Smith Sr. is serving time in the Albemarle Correction Institution for the beating of Jill Marker at the former Silk Plant Forest store in Winston-Salem in 1995. Smith has always maintained his innocence and a growing amount of evidence has cast doubt on his conviction.*



Rev. Runnels (center) poses with his wife Pamela and son Hasting. Submitted Photos



Rev. Runnels with his wife Pamela and son Hasting.

### Runnels

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Forest Divinity School student who plans to follow his uncle into the pastoral care ministry. "For me, missing that support has been difficult."

Dr. Damian Covington, who lived in Winston-Salem from 1995-1999, said he and Runnels had been close friends for nearly two decades. Both men had graduated from Hampton University in the same year, attended Emmanuel Baptist Church, and had committed their lives to service, said Covington, a family practitioner who now resides in Richmond, Va. Covington describes Runnels, whom he affectionately referred to as "Rev.," as being "a very personable, spiritual guy who was easy to talk to and a joy to be around."

"It was actually more of a brotherhood," Covington said of their friendship. "It was a very strong, close relationship."

Those who knew Runnels say he had a serious, yet warm demeanor and was always ready with an encouraging word, and he wasn't afraid to set people straight if he felt they'd gone astray.

"Calvin to me was kind of a stern person, a very direct person, but very friendly," said Ken Causer, the minister of music at First Calvary Baptist Church, where Runnels pastored for eight years before stepping down in 2008 to devote more time to his family. "He was actually my best friend. We got along like brothers. I was just crazy about that man."

Even in his final hours, Runnels, who left behind a wife and four year-old son, remained steadfast in his faith and set an example for others to follow, Covington said.

"He transformed from my best friend to my hero during that process, because he never complained - he walked with faith," Covington related. "He changed my life."

Knowing that he was one of many friends and loved ones who struggled to come to terms with living life in Runnels' absence, Covington decided to honor the former First Calvary Baptist pastor's memory in a way that would allow people to come together and celebrate Runnels' life as a unit.

"The whole idea of this celebration was generated from the void that I feel - and what I'm finding so many feel - with his loss," explained Covington, a father of three. "The focus is to celebrate someone that's truly missed. It's an opportunity to give thanks and fellowship together, in honor of him."

What began as an intimate gathering of Runnels' closest friends blossomed into a full fledged tribute Celebration Benefit Concert. It will be held on Saturday, Jan. 28 - Runnels' birthday - at Emmanuel, his home church.

"All I can say is that it's a reflection of the man that we celebrate. He was truly a champion of life, a champion of people, and I think this interest, this people wanting to be a part of it, is all about him and the way he touched people's lives," Covington said. "It's just a tribute to Calvin and the person he is and the person he was, and the person he will always be."

A love offering that is taken up during the concert will benefit one of Runnels' favorite things: education. Those in attendance who choose to give will be allowed to designate their gifts either for the college fund of Hasting, his son, or a Racial Ethnic Multicultural (REM) Network scholarship in Runnels' name. Runnels was a staunch supporter of REM, a network of the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, Inc. which provides education and support for people of color in the pastoral care field.

Covington, who is sponsoring the 6 p.m. event, enlisted the help of Causer, who organized the concert, and its former associate minister, Annie Dalton, who will serve as mistress of ceremonies. Despite the loss they feel, organizers of the concert are adamant that its tenor will be upbeat.

"I've shed more tears over these last months than at any other time in my life, but what I don't want is for this to be a funeral," said Dalton, a Hospice chaplain who credits Runnels with ushering her into the pastoral care ministry. "It is a joy to celebrate his life and all he stood for and what



Concert supporters (clockwise, from top) Ken Causer, Helen Cooper, Jonathan Tennial and Annie Dalton. Photo by Layla Farmer

## Who Gets Food Stamps?

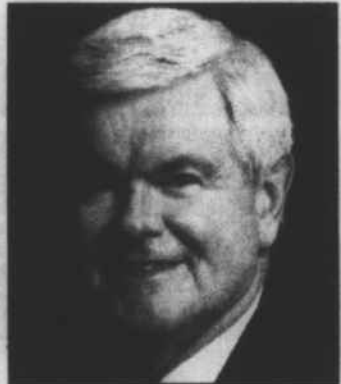


**Julianne Malveaux**  
Guest Columnist

Newt Gingrich is playing racial politics and he is playing to win. First, he says that black children should get jobs as janitors (why not suggest they get the same consulting contract he did at Freddie Mac - I'm with Mitt Romney here, what did Gingrich tell Freddie Mac that was worth more than a million dollars? Then he says that he wants to tell the NAACP that we should demand jobs, not food stamps. He so bristles at Fox commentator Juan Williams that he gets a standing O in South Carolina. And he has repeatedly described President Barack Obama as a "food stamp" President. It's race baiting, pure and simple, and few have called him on it.

The true food stamp story goes something like this. In 2006, just 26.5 million Americans received food stamps. By 2011, the number had spiked to more than 45 million people. This has been the result of the Great Recession that has left at least 13 million people officially unemployed for an average of 40 weeks. Those are the official numbers, but they may be twice as high when we consider the people who have part time work and want full time work and those who have dropped out of the labor market because it costs too much to look for work. President Obama is not a food stamps president; he is a president who inherited an economic crisis. Newt is being extremely disingenuous and extraordinarily racist in his food stamps rap.

While about 14 percent of all of us - one in seven -



Newt Gingrich

gets food stamps, in some states, the number is as high as one in five. In South Carolina, for example, poverty is greater than it is in the nation and 18.2 percent of South Carolinians get food stamps. The number in Maine is 18.6 percent, in Louisiana 19.2 percent, in Michigan 19.7 percent, in Oregon 20.1 percent, and in Mississippi 20.7 percent. Given the racial dynamics in South Carolina, did Newt decide to show out in a state where there is more poverty than elsewhere, and when the racial resentments (remember I said Confederate flag waving) don't need much fuel to turn to fire. He got a standing O by pandering to racial stereotypes. And that pandering may well have propelled him into victory.

Newt has managed to paint food stamps as a black program, partly by describing our president as a "food stamps" president, and partly by putting food stamps in context with the NAACP. But Mr. Gingrich, often touted for his intelligence, must be bright enough to know that most food stamp recipients are not African American. Indeed, according to the Associated Press, 49 percent of food stamp recipients are white, 26 percent are African American, and 20 percent are Hispanic. Indeed, some of the folks who gave Newt a standing O are food stamp recipients, but they chose to bond with Newt's

racially coded messages instead of their own economic reality.

Poverty has a different face than it has ever had before. People who used to have big jobs and fancy cars are now struggling to make ends meet. People who always struggled are now strangling. More than 2 million families have doubled up in the past year because they needed a family lifeline to save their lives and their worlds. More than 40 percent of African American children live in poverty. Newt Gingrich would blame the poor for their situation, but the economy that President Obama inherited is an economy that has thrust people into despair. Food stamps are a lifeline for many. How dare candidate Gingrich attack President Obama for providing relief to 45 million Americans!

Most food stamp recipients are people who used to work, and they would, frankly, rather be working than receiving assistance. But they have downsized their lifestyles, their dreams and their expectations. They are waiting for the job market to roar back. Half of the 45 million are white, and some of them stood to applaud Gingrich. Do they really think that a man who disdains the poor will provide them with a lifeline? Do they really believe that a man who is selling wolf tickets to the NAACP is really concerned with the well-being of the least and the left out? The poverty that too many Americans experience is repugnant. The extent to which politicians trivialize such poverty is character revealing. Who will put American back to work? Who will alleviate poverty?

*Julianne Malveaux is President of Bennett College in Greensboro.*



Damian Covington (center) poses with his father and Runnels (left) following his graduation from Wake Forest School of Medicine in 1999.

he meant to so many people."

Causer, the owner of Renovations Unlimited, compiled a sampling of music and dance performances that reflect Runnels' life, encompassing the jazz lover's favorite songs, places and performers. The choirs of Emmanuel and First Calvary have come together to form a mass choir for the event, and each church is sending dance groups to perform. Local singing sensations Expressions - which was formed at First Calvary and is said to have been one of Runnels' favorite female groups - will perform, as will Runnels' sister Gail Tennial and his cousin, recording artist Shawn Tate.

"I look forward to the fellowship and celebration, and hopefully, it will be therapeutic for those who are dealing with the loss of him," Covington said.

For those who didn't know Runnels the way they did, friends say the concert will provide a glimpse of why he is so deeply missed.

"I want people to get the life that Calvin lived," said Helen Cooper, a former colleague whom Runnels christened as his godmother upon his arrival in Winston-Salem. "It was short but yet, his purpose had been fulfilled. He left a legacy for all of us."

For more information about the Celebration Benefit Concert, contact Causer at 336-577-6969 or kcauser@triad.rr.com.