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## Emancipation Proclamation Day service urges African Americans to earn college degrees

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A rousing performance by a gospel choir and fiery oratory from several speakers brought people at Antioch Missionary Baptist Church to their feet Saturday, clapping, shouting and joining in support of the goal of better education for more young African Americans.

“We are in a crisis!” thundered Rev. Frank M. Smith Jr., president of the Interdenominational Ministerial Coalition, which held the two-hour service. “We won’t accept Fs from our children. We will require our children to behave.”

The coalition used its annual Emancipation Proclamation Day worship service — held each year in honor of President Abraham Lincoln’s Jan. 1, 1863 Emancipation Proclamation freeing slaves — to highlight this year’s goal of increasing the number of college degrees among African Americans.

As part of a broader effort by Louisville to raise the number of college degrees held by residents by 55,000 by 2020, the ministerial coalition is throwing its support behind an effort to make sure at least 15,000 of those degrees are awarded to African American students.

Rev. Kevin Cosby, senior pastor at St. Stephen Church, told the crowd that filled the Antioch church that the churches play a vital role in that effort.

“We all know nothing of significance will take place in the African American community if the church is not at the forefront,” Cosby told the audience, to nods and murmurs of assent.

Smith, pastor of Christ’s Church for Our Community, called for specific steps from members of the various churches that make up the coalition. He urged them to “create and support a college-going culture” in their communities, to offer help with books, school supplies and tutoring to families in need and to make sure children have the tools they need to achieve success in school.

“Every home should have a desk in it with a good lamp and study materials,” he said.

The audience also heard from Mayor-elect Greg Fischer, who pledged to continue support for the college degree program launched by outgoing Mayor Jerry Abramson.

“The way to jobs is through education,” Fischer said, sparking exclamations of “Oh Yeah!” and “Amen!”

The coalition also used Saturday’s service to bestow awards on three people for work to improve their communities and advance education.

The Rev. W.J. Hodge Leadership Award was given to Robert and Deborah Blair, who opened the West End School in 2005, a small private boarding school aimed at providing a high-quality education to disadvantaged middle-school-aged boys. The school, funded through donations, is free and has helped troubled youths achieve academic success, officials said Saturday,

The Rev, William E. Summers III Community Service Award went to Lucile Boston Leggett, a former teacher and a community volunteer who has worked with a number of local agencies that provide educational assistance and other children's services.

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