



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

James Sanders Jr.

Master Builder, the Rev. Dr. Calvin Butts, Talks Economic Development at Sanders' Clergy Breakfast

JAMES SANDERS JR. November 4, 2015



State Senator James Sanders Jr. (D-Rochdale Village) held a Community Clergy Breakfast on October 30th at First Presbyterian Church in Far Rockaway, bringing together faith-based leaders of different denominations from across the district to share information and discuss ways they can help their congregations.

“Have a pen and a piece of paper ready, have your mind ready, have your spirit ready,” Senator Sanders advised the participants. “Questions are at the core of everything we do, so

ask questions. You want to know how to build a kingdom. You want to know how you are going to take what you are doing and go to the next level, and the level after that.”

This month's guest speaker was the Rev. Dr. Calvin Butts, pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. He is the chairman of a non-profit that is responsible for over \$600 million in housing and commercial development in Harlem, and he helped establish the Thurgood Marshall Academy for Learning and Social Change—a public, state-of-the-art, intermediate and high school.

Butts, a minister for the last 45 years, said he is blessed to have had a challenging, but fruitful career. He recalled how as a young man he heard the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream,” speech, which set the foundation for the work he does in the ministry.

“The dream represents a prophetic vision,” Butts said, adding, “You cannot expect to be engaged in a prophetic ministry without struggle.”

For Butts, King’s dream represented a blueprint, a way to make sure people had a place to live, something to eat, somewhere to heal, and a pristine environment to surround them. He saw himself as the implementer of the dream and that’s where community development came into play.

Butts start looking around for opportunities to make the dream live. He was residing in Harlem at the time and noticed housing, education and business had declined. Butts told the story of a woman living on a fixed income in a rapidly deteriorating building across the street from the church. She was about to lose her rent-controlled apartment to private development. Butts worked with the area City Council Member, who introduced legislation that would stop private developers from taking over property unless they partnered with a

community-based organization.

“Guess what we were?” Butts asked. “That’s what a church is – a community-based organization, and then that community-based organization was eligible to purchase that property for \$1, and that’s essentially how we ended up developing over 2,500 units of affordable housing.”

Butts recalled how Dr. King used his influence with the masses to affect change and influence lawmakers. He said success was dependent on the public sector, private sector and the community working together and included the help of banks, insurance companies and private foundations.

“Abyssinian is a very large church, with a very long and distinguished history,” Butts said. “We had the human resources, we had accountants, we had lawyers, you’ve got to have these people, because it’s no easy task to build housing in New York City.”

Butts also stressed that the development arm of the church should have independent leadership that is not influenced by pastoral concern, because if a minister is going to speak out on behalf of the community on issues like health care, housing, food service and public safety, those beliefs could adversely affect business relationships.

“Once you stand on the word, in terms of what you see and what you believe, and that God is leading you, it puts you in the direct line of confrontation,” Butts said.

Community Clergy Breakfast training sessions are held by Senator Sanders every month, with a new topic each time, but always aimed at educating clergy and giving them the tools and information they need to help themselves and their congregations.