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Public Sector and Black Church Partnerships: A New Public Policy Tool

by Marjorie B. Lewis

Since the mid-sixties, local, state and federal policies and their resulting agencies have been involved in an ongoing war on poverty. The goals of this effort have been to eradicate poverty through exogenous motivators, which include “work fare” programs, “head start” programs, and welfare “reform” initiatives.¹ As well-intentioned as these efforts may have been, results have proven less than successful, particularly for inner-city African-American youth. In his paper, “The Rich Get Richer and the Black Poor Get Poorer,” Samuel Myers reiterates this assessment, and shows that the plight of the inner-city dweller who is poor, uneducated, and African American has degenerated over the last twenty-five years.² The plight of this group, according to Myers, is in part, due to the marginalization of African-American males. This marginalization has resulted in unprecedented gang violence, school dropout rates, imposition of violence to property and persons in African-American inner-city communities, and a high proportion of African-American female-headed households with no, or low incomes below the poverty level.

Recent studies of urban Black churches indicate that they play a vital role in the provision on a wide array of services to members and non-members in their local community.³ In addition to ministering to the spiritual needs of its members, the Black Church has long responded to the needs of non-members through its varied and extensive community outreach efforts.

Historically, black churches have been the preeminent institution in the black community for strengthening and stabilizing black families. Since their inception in the eighteenth century, black churches have performed vital spiritual, cultural, social, economic, educational, health, social welfare, community development, economic development and leadership development functions. In addition to forming black educational facilities at the pre-school, elementary, high school and college levels, black religious institutions have been instrumental in creating life insurance companies, banks, other businesses, credit unions, hospitals, nursing homes, funeral homes, orphanages and housing for the elderly and low-income families, and in providing food, clothing and shelter to the needy. Most

beneficiaries of such efforts are community residents who are not church members.⁴

By virtue of its historical track record, continuing pervasiveness throughout the Black community, high esteem and access to resources, the Black Church has the potential to play a critical role in expanding and improving social reform. For example, a 1986 Gallup poll conducted for the Joint Center for Political Studies revealed the following:

- African Americans believe, that next to the federal government, the Church has the greatest responsibility to help the poor;
- Seventy-five percent of philanthropic dollars in the African-American community are funneled through the Black Church;
- Most volunteer activities of African Americans center around the Church.⁵ A survey of 315 randomly selected churches in the northeastern region of the United States showed that they were important social service institutions targeting families and the community.⁶

Black churches offered programs to meet the community needs which include: 1) the provision of food, clothing and shelter; 2) services for poor families; and 3) youth and elderly programs.

The Black Church historically provided a range of social services to the community on its own initiative. Prior to the development of secular organizations for the provision of social welfare assistance, job counseling, health care and housing, the Black Church was the chief vehicle for community service provision. A more recent study of Black churches in the Northeast concludes that “the contemporary Black church continues to provide social service functions as extensions of its spiritual and religious functions.”⁷

The church has also been the mainstay of the African-American family since slavery.

The marginalization of African-American youth is primarily due to economic oppression, but this factor does lead to self-disruptive behavior. It is my belief that the negative and self-destructive behavior can be, and are being countered by the community activities of the Black Church. This institution, in relation to other community-based entities (local schools and community-based organizations), is the most viable vehicle for community-based empowerment, furthermore. There are several reasons for this claim. First, the Church is egalitarian in its acceptance of participants. The Church has also been the mainstay of the African-American family since slavery. Additionally, the Church incorporates all cohorts of the African-American community.⁸ Thus, a valuable asset of the African-American Church is that it is a “universal” organization of the African-American community. The African-American Church is already established with a long history of activism, which

provides yet another reason for its capacity to serve as a source of vehicle for community-based empowerment. In the following section, I highlight instances of partnering between the Black Church and some local communities that illustrate the advantages of utilizing the Church to counter negative social behavior engendered by economic oppression.

The Black Church in Action

Denver, Colorado:

Mayor Wellington Webb of Denver, Colorado and the Ministerial Alliance of East Denver, Colorado frequently collaborate on issues associated with the African-American community within the city of Denver. Local governmental support is manifested through the mayor and his cabinet's personal participation, particularly in church-based efforts aimed at enhancing self-esteem in youth between the ages of 8 to 12. These programs are provided through four African-American churches (two Baptist, one Methodist, and one Church of God in Christ). All four projects are community-based. Of the 75 participants, an average of 35 percent of the participants were members of the local churches. Measures of the youths' self-esteem levels were significantly changed reflecting more positive attitudes regarding their self-worth and willingness to help others.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania:

Former mayor of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Sophie Masloff, established an office in 1987 to handle religious affairs, the purpose of which was to identify how churches might be useful in curbing a number of youth anti-social issues, particularly, teen pregnancy. From her office came a grant to sponsor a workshop addressing the issue of teenage pregnancy. Teens from the ages of 12 and older were invited to plan this initiative. The planning workshop was financed by the mayor's office and coordinated with the various churches throughout the city. The same indicators were measured before and up to three months after the workshop. The results were as follows: Of the 141 participants, 80 percent were affiliated with a church; of the remaining 20 percent, none of the participants or their families changed their church activity up to three months after the workshop. Again the attitudes of the participants indicated a significant change in relation to self-esteem and perceived control over their environment. Two indicators highly correlated with the propensity to avoid teenage pregnancy.

Oakland, California:

Louis Sullivan, the former Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, demonstrated confidence in the Allen Temple Baptist Church of Oakland, California through a grant to be used by that church to serve as a conduit for community-based empowerment. The purpose of the effort is to address anti-social behavior on the part of African-American males.

This is a three-year project which began early Spring

1991. Of the 210 African-American males participating in the community-based program, 38 percent of the youth originally belonged to a church. Of the remaining 62 percent, 15 percent have become active at Allen Temple. Since the program is still in progress, indicators regarding attitudinal changes are incomplete; however, preliminary results show significant changes in the participants attitudes and behavior as measured by self-esteem and efficacy indicators, as well as disruptive behavior in school, and school attendance.

Conclusion

There are concerns expressed regarding the declining penetration of the African-American Church within the community, especially as it relates to the youth. While these issues are important, they do not preclude the fact that church-based, governmentally-supported programs are effective for both congregants and non-congregants. This is illustrated in the three cities with such initiatives. Church and state partnering remains fully untapped as a resource for public policy. The options available to policy makers regarding the plight of the inner-city, however, are quickly diminishing. If there is evidence that churches can help public policy achieve its goals and work with the non-profit sector, particularly in relation to the plight of the inner-city youth, it seems plausible to pursue aggressive efforts to utilize Black churches to a greater extent than has been the case to this point. This brief essay proposes that scholars and activists interested in resolving urban and racial crisis begin to consider the importance, and timeliness of the Black Church as a major policy tool—and partner for non-profit organizations.

Notes

¹These factors were discussed during the June 20, 1992 Town Meeting West, jointly sponsored by the Graduate School of Public Affairs University of Colorado Denver, KUSA-TV, and the *Rocky Mountain News*.

²Samuel Myers. *The Rich Get Richer and the Black Poor Get Poorer*. Paper presented at meeting, Town Meeting West, 20 June 1992, Denver, Colorado.

³See, Andrew Billingsley, *Black Churches and Family-Oriented Community Outreach Programs in the Northeastern United States*. Report of The Ford Foundation and Lilly Endowment Foundation, 1991; and Alicia D. Byrd (Ed.) *Philanthropy and the Black Church* (New York: Council on Foundations, 1990).

⁴Andrew Billingsley, *Twelve Gates to the City: Black Churches, Black Families, and the Black Community*. In Byrd (Ed.), *Philanthropy and the Black Church*.

⁵Carson D. Emmett, *Despite Long History, Black Philanthropy Gets Little Credit as "Self-Help" Tool*. In Byrd (Ed.), *Philanthropy and the Black Church*.

⁶Billingsley, *Twelve Gates to the City*.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 33

⁸There are relatively low levels of African-American participation in community-based organizations other than churches. As in the case of public education institutions, social organizations are generally geared to a homogeneous cohort in relation to the ages of participants. It is difficult to find specific programs and efforts geared to meet comprehensively the needs of the African-American individual, family or community within a unitary framework.

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