
Supporting Black Churches

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UNDER WHAT, IF ANY, conditions can the life prospects of today's black inner-city poor be improved, and how, if at all, can we foster those conditions? My argument in this essay is that supporting black churches and other faith-based grassroots organizations that perform youth and community outreach functions in poor inner-city neighborhoods is a necessary and vital although insufficient condition for repairing the social fabric and restoring economic vitality in truly disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. The case for supporting black churches rests upon a certain constellation of ideas and findings concerning inner-city poverty, religiosity and volunteers, religious faith as a factor in ameliorating social problems, and the extent of church-anchored outreach in black urban neighborhoods.

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Black Inner-City Poverty

Recent research by the editors of this book and others has clearly shown that black Americans have progressed economically over the last half century.¹ Even analysts who have emphasized the persistence of black poverty and black-white income gaps have acknowledged that “there have been significant improvements since 1940 in the absolute and relative positions of blacks”; that black Americans represent a trillion-dollar-plus annual market larger than that of “most countries in the world”; that “the majority of working-class and middle-class black families have made some important gains”; and that since “the early 1990s, black family income has risen.”² But as I have argued elsewhere, unless we propose to do nothing more than continue idle academic or ideological debates, the triumph of overall black economic progress neither can nor should obscure the tragedy of black poverty and joblessness.³

Black Americans made substantial economic progress in the 1960s, but each post-1970 recession exacted a disproportionate toll on blacks regardless of family structure; for example, Robert B. Hill estimated that the four recessions between 1970 and 1985 led to a tripling in the jobless rates among blacks in two-parent families as well as among blacks in mother-only households.⁴ As the national economy improved in the late 1980s, black men and women still had unemployment rates more than double those of whites. Even after the boom years of the 1990s, 40 percent of black children, concentrated heavily in central city neighborhoods, continued to live in below-the-poverty-line households.⁵

Some analysts deflect such concerns about black inner-city poverty by debating statistical measures of what it means to be poor, or by stressing that intra-group rates of poverty and other social ills among blacks have varied largely according to marital status and other conditions that reflect individual choices. There is, however, no genuine empirical or moral basis for denying that millions of black children, through absolutely no fault of their own, remain economically disadvantaged in neighborhoods where jobs are few and drugs, crime, and failed public schools are common.

Religiosity and Volunteers

How we approach black inner-city poverty is bound to be affected by religious ideals, influences, and institutions. “The United States,” observes George Gallup Jr., “is one of the most devout nations of the entire industrialized world, in terms of religious beliefs and practices.”⁶ Black Americans are in many ways the most religious people in America. Some 82 percent of blacks (versus 67 percent of whites) are church members; 82 percent of blacks (versus 55 percent of whites) say that religion is “very important in their life”; and 86 percent of blacks (versus 60 percent of whites) believe that religion “can answer all or most of today’s problems.”⁷

As Father Andrew Greeley has observed, both “frequency of church attendance and membership in church organizations correlate strongly with voluntary service. People who attend services once a week or more are approximately twice as likely to volunteer as those who attend rarely if ever.”⁸ The best available data suggest that religious organizations and “relationships related to their religion” are the major forces in mobilizing volunteers in America; even a third of purely secular volunteers (persons who did not volunteer for specifically religious activities) relate their service “to the influence of a relationship based in their religion.”⁹ Similarly, as Gallup has reported, “Churches and other religious bodies are the major supporters of voluntary services for neighborhoods and communities. Members of a church or synagogue . . . tend to be much more involved in charitable activity, particularly through organized groups.”¹⁰

Faith Factor Findings

But what, if any, social consequences for blacks and other Americans flow from religiosity and faith-based charitable, volunteer, and community-serving work? Is there any scientific evidence to justify the faith of most black Americans that religion can “answer all or most of today’s problems”?

James Q. Wilson has succinctly summarized the small but not insignificant body of credible evidence to date: “Religion, independent of social class, reduces deviance.”¹¹ For example, consider the latest research of David B. Larson, the medical research scientist who pioneered the development of research on public health outcomes (physical health, mental health, addictions) that led to new training programs at Harvard and three dozen other medical schools.¹² With criminologist Byron Johnson, Larson has reviewed some 400 juvenile delinquency studies published between 1980 and 1997. They report that “the better the study design and measurement methodology, the greater the likelihood the research will produce statistically significant and beneficial results associated with ‘the faith factor.’”¹³ In other words, the more scientific the study, the more optimistic are its findings about the extent to which “religion reduces deviance.”

This conclusion squares with the results of another major review of the relevant research literature as it pertains to adult criminals: “Our research confirms that the religiosity and crime relationship for adults is neither spurious nor contingent. . . . Religion, as indicated by religious activities, had direct personal effects on adult criminality as measured by a broad range of criminal acts. Further, the relationship held even with the introduction of secular controls.”¹⁴ In other words, “religion matters” in reducing adult crime.

Beyond crime and delinquency, in a 1996 synopsis of faith factor research, Patrick Fagan of the Heritage Foundation summarized studies suggesting that religion enhances family stability (the family that prays together is indeed more likely to stay together), improves health, reduces adolescent sexual activities and teenage pregnancies, cuts alcohol and drug abuse, and reinforces other measures of “social stability.”¹⁵

In 1985, Harvard economist Richard Freeman reported that church-going, independent of other factors, made young black males from high-poverty neighborhoods substantially more likely to escape poverty, crime, and other social ills.¹⁶ In a forthcoming reanalysis and extension of Freeman’s work, Larson and Johnson mine national longitudinal data on urban

black youth and find that religion is indeed a powerful predictor of escaping poverty, crime, and other social ills.¹⁷

Black Church Outreach Tradition

The black church has a unique and uniquely powerful youth and community outreach tradition. The black church's historic role in providing education, social services, and a safe gathering place prefigured its historic role in the civil rights movement.

There are eight major historically black Christian churches: African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Christian Methodist Episcopal, Church of God in Christ, National Baptist Convention of America, National Baptist Convention, USA, National Missionary Baptist Convention, and the Progressive National Baptist Convention. There are also scores of independent or quasi-independent black churches and at least nine certified religious training programs operated by accredited seminaries that are directed toward ministry in black churches and black faith communities. Together, the eight major black denominations alone encompass some 65,000 churches and about 20 million members.

Until the 1990s, however, the richly religious lives of black Americans and the black church outreach tradition were given short shrift by both historians and social scientists, and not just by white historians and social scientists. Writing in 1994 in a special double edition of *National Journal of Sociology*, Andrew Billingsley, a dean of black family studies, noted that the subject was largely ignored even by leading black scholars who were keenly aware of "the social significance of the black church," including many who "were actually members of a black church."¹⁸

An empirically well-grounded perspective on contemporary black church outreach is provided by sociologist Harold Dean Trulear, an ordained black minister who taught for eight years at the New York Theological Seminary, has conducted extensive research on black clergy training, and is presently vice president for research on religion and at-risk youth at Public/Private Ventures in Philadelphia. "When it comes to youth and

community outreach in the inner city,” Trulear cautions, “not all black urban churches are created equal”:

Naturally, it’s in part a function of high resident membership. Inner-city churches with high resident membership cater more to high-risk neighborhood youth than . . . black churches with inner-city addresses but increasingly or predominantly suburbanized or commuting congregations. [The high resident membership black churches] tend to cluster by size and evangelical orientation. . . . It’s the small- and medium-sized churches . . . [especially] the so-called . . . blessing stations and specialized youth chapels with their charismatic leader and their small, dedicated staff of adult volunteers [that] . . . do a disproportionate amount of the up-close and personal outreach work with the worst-off inner-city youth.”¹⁹

Surveys of Church-Based Outreach

When it comes to solving urban problems and the plight of the black inner-city poor, black churches cannot do it all (or do it alone), and not all black churches do it. But that reality should not obscure the black church outreach tradition and its many and powerful contemporary manifestations. The pathbreaking research of scholars such as Eric C. Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, combined with recent systematic research by Trulear and others, should persuade even a dedicated skeptic to take church-based outreach seriously, especially where the black community is concerned.

In a forthcoming study, P/PV’s Jeremy White and Mary de Marcellus report on the results of their intensive six-month field exploration of youth-serving ministries in the District of Columbia.²⁰ They interviewed leaders and volunteers in 129 of the city’s faith-based ministries, including on-site visits to 79 churches, faith-based nonprofit organizations, and schools, virtually all led by blacks and serving predominantly black populations. From this research, they concluded that “there is a critical mass of faith-based organizations in Washington, D.C., that work directly and intensively with at-risk youth.” The programs fell into “six major categories: after-

school or tutoring programs; evangelization; gang violence prevention; youth groups; and mentoring.”²¹

None of the programs studied by White and de Marcellus required youth to be the children of a particular church, profess any particular religious beliefs, or agree to eventual “churching” as a condition for receiving services, entering church buildings, or otherwise benefiting from the programs. Also, almost none of the programs, even those that furnished children with material goods such as clothes or books, charged a fee. In the words of one of the outreach ministers quoted on the first page of their report, “The cost of real love is no charge.”²²

The results of a survey of “faith-based service providers in the nation’s capital” were published in 1998 by the Urban Institute.²³ The survey found that 95 percent of the congregations performed outreach services. The 226 religious congregations (out of 1,100 surveyed) that responded (67 of them in the District, the rest in Maryland or Virginia) provided a total of over 1,000 community services to over 250,000 individuals in 1996.

In the mid-1990s, a six-city survey of how over 100 randomly selected urban churches (and four synagogues) constructed in 1940 or earlier serve their communities was undertaken by Ram A. Cnnan of the University of Pennsylvania. The survey was commissioned and published by Partners for Sacred Places, a Philadelphia-based national nonprofit organization dedicated to the care and good use of older religious properties.²⁴ Congregations were surveyed in Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, Indianapolis, Mobile, and the Bay Area (Oakland and San Francisco). Each church surveyed participated in a series of in-depth interviews. Among the Cnnan-Partners survey’s key findings were the following: 93 percent of the churches opened their doors to the larger community; on average, each church provided over 5,300 hours of volunteer support to its community programs (the equivalent of two and a half full-time volunteers stationed year-round at the church); on average, each church provided about \$140,000 a year in community programs, or about sixteen times what it received from program beneficiaries; on average, each church supported four major programs and provided informal and impromptu services as

well; and poor children who were not the sons or daughters of church members or otherwise affiliated with the church benefited from church-supported programs more than any other single group.

The best known and still the most comprehensive survey focusing exclusively on black churches was published in 1990 by Lincoln and Mamiya.²⁵ In *The Black Church in the African-American Experience*, they reported on the results of surveys encompassing nearly 1,900 ministers and over 2,100 churches. Some 71 percent of black clergy reported that their churches engaged in many community outreach programs, including day care, job search, substance abuse prevention, and food and clothing distribution.²⁶ Black urban churches, they found, were generally more engaged in outreach than rural ones. Though many urban churches also engaged in quasi-political activities and organizing, few received government money, and most clergy expressed concerns about receiving government money; only about 8 percent of all the churches surveyed received any federal government funds.²⁷

A number of site-specific and regional surveys of black churches followed the publication of Lincoln and Mamiya's book. So far, they all have been broadly consistent with the Lincoln-Mamiya survey results on black church outreach. To cite just two examples, in a survey of 150 black churches in Atlanta, Naomi Ward and her colleagues found that 131 of the churches were "actively engaged in extending themselves into the community."²⁸ And a survey of 635 Northern black churches found that two-thirds of the churches engaged in a wide range of "family-oriented community outreach programs," including mentoring, drug abuse prevention, teenage pregnancy prevention, and other outreach efforts "directed at children and youth."²⁹

The data from the Lincoln-Mamiya surveys were reanalyzed in the course of a 1997 study of black theological education certificate programs (Bible institutes, denominational training programs, and seminary non-degree programs). The study was directed by Trulear in collaboration with Tony Carnes and commissioned by the Ford Foundation.³⁰ Trulear and Carnes compared certain of the Lincoln-Mamiya survey results with data

gathered in their own survey of 724 students representing twenty-eight theological certificate programs that focused on serving black students. Three-quarters of those surveyed by Trulear and Carnes reported that their church encouraged them “to be involved in my local community,” more than half said relevance to “my community’s needs” was of major importance to them in choosing a theological certificate program, and about half were already involved in certain types of charitable community work.³¹

Religious Racial Reconciliation

If black church outreach is so potent, why is it that inner-city poverty, crime, and other problems remain so severe? That is a fair question, but it can easily be turned around: How much worse would things be in Boston and Austin, Philadelphia and Los Angeles, and other cities were it not for largely unsung faith-based youth and community outreach efforts? How much more would government or charitable organizations need to expend, and how many new volunteers would need to be mobilized, in the absence of church-anchored outreach? The answers are “much worse” and “lots.”

Citizens who for whatever reasons are nervous about enhanced church-state partnerships should be reassured by the consistent findings that faith-based outreach efforts benefit poor unchurched neighborhood children most of all, and that most outreach ministries receive no government money. If these churches are so willing to support “the least of these,” surely they deserve the support of the rest of us—corporations, foundations, and, where appropriate, government agencies.

Persons of all faiths and of no faith should support black church outreach efforts. At a minimum, the black church paramedics of inner-city America’s civil society deserve the support of Christian churches, both black and white, both urban and suburban. A genuine dialogue about racial reconciliation among Christians, accompanied by a Christ-centered com-

mitment to help—or to help those who help—the inner-city minority poor, would light the way.

It is morally wrong and socially myopic to turn our heads and harden our hearts to the plight of the black inner-city poor. As Father Richard John Neuhaus has argued, rather than merely exposing “liberal fatuities about remedying the ‘root causes’ of poverty and crime . . . there must be another way. Just believing that is a prelude to doing something. The something in question is centered in religion that is both motive and means, and extends to public policy tasks that should claim the attention of all Americans.”³² Say amen.

Notes

1. Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom, *America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

2. See: National Research Council, *A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1989), p. 274; Marcus Alexis and Geraldine R. Henderson, “The Economic Base of African-American Communities: A Study of Consumption Patterns,” in *National Urban League, The State of Black America 1994* (New York: National Urban League, January 1994), p. 81; Robert B. Hill et al., *Research on the African-American Family: A Holistic Perspective* (Westport, Conn.: Auburn House, 1993), p. 2; Council of Economic Advisors, *Changing America: Indicators of Social and Economic Well-Being by Race and Hispanic Origin* (Washington, D.C.: President’s Initiative on Race, September 1998), p. 33.

3. John J. DiIulio Jr., “State of Grace,” *National Review*, December 22, 1997, pp. 62–66.

4. Robert B. Hill, “The Black Middle Class: Past, Present, and Future,” *National Urban League: The State of Black America 1986* (New York: National Urban League, 1986), pp. 43–64.

5. Council of Economic Advisors, *Changing America*, p. 38.

6. George Gallup Jr., *Emerging Trends, Princeton Research Center* 18 (March 1996): 5. See also Richard Morin, “Keeping the Faith: A Survey Shows the United States Has the Most Churchgoing People in the Developed World,” *Washington Post Weekly Edition*.

7. George Gallup Jr., “Religion in America: Will the Vitality of Churches Be the Surprise of the Next Century?” *Public Perspective*, October–November 1995, p. 4.

8. Andrew Greeley, "The Other Civic America: Religion and Social Capital," *American Prospect* 32 (May–June 1997): 70
9. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
10. Gallup, "Religion in America," p. 2.
11. James Q. Wilson, "Two Nations," paper delivered as Francis Boyer Lecture, American Enterprise Institute, December 4, 1997, p. 10.
12. See David B. Larson et al., *Scientific Research on Spirituality and Health* (Radnor, Pa.: John M. Templeton Foundation, October 1, 1997).
13. David B. Larson and Byron Johnson, "Systematic Review of Delinquency Research," preliminary draft, 1998, and personal correspondence with Larson, September 1, 1998.
14. T. David Evans et al., "Religion and Crime Reexamined: The Impact of Religion, Secular Controls, and Social Ecology on Adult Criminality," *Criminology* 33, no. 2 (1995): 211–12.
15. Patrick Fagan, "Why Religion Matters: The Impact of Religious Practice on Social Stability," *Heritage Foundation Backgrounder*, no. 164 (January 25, 1996).
16. Richard B. Freeman, "Who Escapes? The Relation of Church-Going and Other Background Factors to the Socio-Economic Performance of Black Male Youths from Inner-City Poverty Tracts," working paper no. 1656, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, Mass., 1985.
17. David B. Larson and Byron Johnson, "Who Escapes? Revisited," final draft, 1998, and personal correspondence with Larson, September 1, 1998.
18. Andrew Billingsley, "The Social Relevance of the Contemporary Black Church," *National Journal of Sociology* 8, nos. 1 and 2 (summer–winter 1994): 3.
19. Interview with the author, June 1998.
20. Jeremy White and Mary de Marcellus, draft of *Faith-Based Outreach to At-Risk Youth in Washington, D.C.: Report of the Partnership for Research on Religion and At-Risk Youth* (Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, forthcoming).
21. *Ibid.*, p. 4, 6.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
23. Tobi Jennifer Printz, *Faith-Based Service Providers in the Nation's Capital: Can They Do More?* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, April 1998).
24. Diane Cohen and A. Robert Jaeger, *Sacred Places at Risk* (Philadelphia: Partners for Sacred Places, 1998).
25. Eric C. Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990).
26. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

28. Naomi Ward et al., "Black Churches in Atlanta Reach Out to the Community," *National Journal of Sociology* 8, nos. 1 and 2 (summer–winter 1994): 59.

29. Roger H. Rubin et al., "The Black Church and Adolescent Sexuality," *ibid.*, pp. 131, 138.

30. Harold Dean Trulear and Tony Carnes, *A Study of the Social Service Dimension of Theological Education Certificate Programs: The 1997 Theological Certificate Program Survey*, submitted to the Ford Foundation, November 1, 1997.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 34, 40–41.

32. Richard John Neuhaus, "The Public Square: A Continuing Survey of Religion and Public Life," *First Things* 81 (March 1998): 63–65.