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THE BLACK CHURCH: A VALID AND VIABLE APPROACH TO SOLVING PUBLIC POLICY AND COMMUNITY PROBLEMS

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This paper addresses aspects concerning the validity (appropriateness and viability) of the Black church as a potential for micro-systemic change agent in relation to macro-systemic (public and/or social policy) goals. Featured are: (1) a historical summary of the First Amendment of our Constitution, provided to empower what will be defined as an autonomous interpretation of the issue of church-state separation. The historical analysis of the First Amendment to the Constitution includes a discussion of its origins as found in the state of Virginia's statute addressing religious freedom.

As well a prototype, the city of Denver, Colorado, is introduced (2) summarizing the black church's potential as a partner with or alternative to the provision of such services by the public sector. This prototype is augmented by a general discussion of the role of the black church in its community.

INTRODUCTION

Recent studies of urban black churches indicate that they play a vital role in the provision of a wide array of services to members and nonmembers in their local community. 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.

1. A Report to the Ford Foundation and Lilly Endowment Black Churches and; Family-Oriented Community Outreach Programs in the Northeastern United States, by Andrew Billingsley. (June 1991).


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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.\(^3\)

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 future social reform. For example, a 1986 Gallup poll conducted for the Joint Center for Political Studies revealed the following:

1) African-Americans believe that next to the federal government, the church has the greatest responsibility to help the poor;

2) 75 percent of philanthropic dollars in the African-American community are funneled through the black church;

3) Most volunteer activities of African-Americans center

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around the church. 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.

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

The black church historically provided social services to the community. 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 northeastern portion of the country concludes that "the contemporary black church continues to provide social service functions as extensions of its spiritual and religious functions."

In the same spirit of conviction regarding the essentiality of the black church as a community change agent, the author of this research paper, in a previous paper, identified three cases of church-state partnering. This was done to establish the church as a significant vehicle for community-based change, to be used in achieving macro public policy objectives. This work featured churches, particularly Protestant, in three cities, Pittsburgh, PA, Oakland, CA, and Denver, CO, who launched partnering efforts with local governments. In each case the goal of the partnership was the modification of youth propensity to manifest anti-social behavior. In each case the approach included partnering between local government and black church organizations. In Pittsburgh the focus group included both males and females. The risk factors identified were educational performance, teen pregnancy, and violent behavior. Oakland's partnering efforts addressed risk factors of a male youth focus group. The factors included alienation and violent behavior. In Denver the focus group comprised teens through an assessment of risk factors including income, educational performance, sense

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6 Ibid., 33.
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of alienation, and the parenting skill level of adults in the household. In each case, through measures of attitudinal factors the intervention of churches as a vehicle for behavioral modification invoked significant transitions away from propensities to manifest anti-social behavior. Such anti-social behavior included, desire to commit violent acts, desire to become pregnant, a lack of motivation to perform in school, and a sense of alienation from society.

This previous research argued for the church as the most viable institution to invoke micro-systemic change for the following reasons. First of all it is an established family oriented institution. Secondly, every household is impacted in some way (directly or indirectly) by someone who attends church. Finally the issue of separation of church and state is becoming less and less viable as the meaning of the First Amendment of our Constitution is continually examined.

This previous research was also constrained by certain issues as follows:

a) Attitudinal measures are not necessarily correlated with behavioral manifestations.

b) While the church is identified as a viable vehicle to address this population, there is a demonstrable decline in church participation across all demographic sectors of our national population. Additionally, there is no indication that such community partnering is universal among churches.

c) Finally, the issue of the edict of church-state separation is still a major point of contention between interpretations of the letter and spirit of this law.

This paper addresses aspects of the above issues concerning the validity (appropriateness and viability) of the black church as a potential for micro-systemic change agent in relation to macro-systemic (public and/or social policy) goals.

Featured are: (1) a historical summary of the First Amendment of our Constitution, provided to empower what will be defined as an autonomous interpretation of the issue of church-state separation. The historical analysis of the First Amendment to the Constitution includes a discussion of its origins as found in the state of Virginia's statute addressing religious freedom.
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THE CHURCH-STATE ISSUE

The First Amendment to the Constitution was based on the Virginia Legislature composition of a "Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom." This document is composed of five different bills categorized as Bill Nos. 82-86 of which one was ratified. The bills are the result of the work of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison in response to their mandate to revise the religious component of the Virginia Commonwealth's legal code.

This section begins with a definition of the "First Amendment" substantiated by a historical summary, along with a discussion of the implications of the historical summary. This is provided to establish the feasibility and legality of church-state partnerships.

Two Interpretations of the Constitution's First Amendment

The mandate introducing the concept of the separation of church and state is found in the First Amendment to our Constitution. According to the United States Constitution, the First Amendment reads:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Since its inception, two perspectives have dominated the interpretations of this Amendment. The first interpretation is represented by an autonomous perspective which is supported in this paper. It provides for a freedom of choice in religious worship. The second interpretation is represented by a separatist model, representing the contemporary establishment of an impregnable wall between church and state. This model provides for the inhibiting of any correlations between the two entities, church and state.
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The support of the noncontemporary, autonomous, interpretation of this First Amendment clause motivates a case for the viability of church-state partnering used to address policy goals. For purposes of this paper, such policy goals are particularly relevant to modification of behavioral outcomes associated with at-risk youth.

The majority and dissenting opinions rendered in a Landmark case addressing these two camps of thought are found in Everson v. Board of Education (1947). The Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of states reimbursing parents for money expended in transporting children to and from parochial schools. In Black's majority opinion which represents an autonomous interpretation of the First Amendment, it states:

Neither a state nor the Federal Government can set up a church. Neither can pass laws which aid one religion, or prefer one religion over another.

Justice Rutledge in the dissenting opinion, on the other hand, asserted the separatist perspective in his interpretation that:

The First Amendment's purpose is to uproot all religious establishments and to create a complete and permanent separation of the spheres of religious activity and civil authority by comprehensively forbidding every form of public aid or support for religion.

In this section, a case is attempted to support the opinion that the separatist perspective represented in the opinion of Justice Rutledge is lacking in historical and analytical merit. In order to argue this point, the following section provides a historical summary of the establishment of the First Amendment.

A Historical Summary of the Creation of the First Amendment

On October 12, 1776, Jefferson introduced a proposal in the Virginia Legislature to reverse the Commonwealth's legal code. This proposal was passed on October 27, 1776. 

\[7^\text{Journal of the House of Delegates 25 (1828 ed.) (26 October 1776).}\]
The proposal established a committee to reverse the legal code. Thomas Jefferson assumed the responsibility for the portion addressing religion. The findings were presented to the Virginia House of Delegates in 1778. The findings relevant to religion were summarized and proposed in five bills which composed the Virginia Legislature composition of a "Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom."\(^8\)

Of these five bills that were proposed (Bill Nos. 82-86) only one passed the legislature (Bill No. 82). The other four bills were not considered. Although only Bill No. 82 was passed, none of the 5 bills comprising the Virginia statute support the separatist interpretation of separation of church and state. They do not provide a rational for the impregnable wall of separation of church and state. This statement is supported through the following discussion of the contents of the statute.

The statute consists of three sections, the preamble, the substance of the bill, and a final section. A compelling component of the statute demonstrated in the following summary, is the evidence that composers of the Constitution, particularly Jefferson and Madison acknowledge in its source documents the existence of an "Almighty God" in the administration of the government.

The first section provides various reasons for the establishment of the bill. It identifies an "Almighty God" as not being coerced into intellectual conformity. Secondly, this section charges legislators and rulers of having assumed domination over the faith of others which has resulted in the coercion of individuals to worship religions that are false to their, dissenting individuals, intellectual conformities. The statute further charges that it is tyrannical to compel a human to support a religion which he rejects or that is an infringement on his freedom to choose. The statute goes further to establish the imposition of religious qualifications as requisites for civil offices as inappropriate.

The second section communicates that human kind should not be compelled by civil government to attend or support any religious worship, place or ministry. It further states that no human should be punished or restrained by the government because of his religious beliefs. Every human is established as free to practice his religious beliefs. Finally, these religious beliefs should not be affected by his civil capacities. The final section establishes that any subsequent repeal of this statute would be an

\(^8\)Report of the Committee of Revisors Appointed by the General Assembly of Virginia, MDCCLXXVI. Dixon, Holt, and Richmond, 1784.
The enactment of Bill No. 82 was also influenced by John Locke, a collaborator Madison, who wrote, "A Letter Concerning Toleration." Locke challenged constraints placed on individual privilege and religious freedom. Issues of forced religious attendance or observance, and sanctions against citizens who publicly expressed their religious opinions were called into question.

Daniel L. Dreisbach summarizes the apparent dilemma resulting from the dissonance between the separatist perspective and the substance of the sources from which the First Amendment to the Constitution is derived. A quotation from his dissenting opinion in the case American Jewish Congress v. City of Chicago states that:

If all endorsement by the state of Christian beliefs is forbidden, then any state that today enacted Jefferson's Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom would be violating the Establishment Clause.

Although the separatist model of interpretation of the First Amendment to our Constitution is based on Thomas Jefferson's bill for Religious Freedom, it does not reflect Jefferson's concept of church-state relations. Since Jefferson's concept of church-state relations motivated the establishment of the bill in the first place, it is the premise of this paper that the separationist model of interpretation of the First Amendment reflects, as stated before, a lack of analytical merit.

Based on the historical analysis provided above, Jefferson's bill did not advocate a strict separation between religion and civil government. Instead it supports an accommodating perspective of church-state relations.

This accommodating perspective is consistent with the autonomous perspective regarding the First Amendment to the Constitution. This perspective is also used to establish or re-establish the feasibility and legality of church-state partnerships, particularly in the black community.

The Pervasive Significance of the Black Church In Community

According to E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro Church in America, the black church has proven the bastion for the black community in most of our sociological realities (politics, education, finances, religion, etc). As well, Carroll Felton, The Care of Souls in the Black Church: A Liberation
The Black Church Perspective, discusses the essential role of the black church in accommodating its communities psychological challenges. There are many current examples of black churches nationwide invoking major impacts on its local community. A review of the program orientations of the fifteen black churches cited in Ebony, January, 1994, is but one summary of the current legacy of local community impact invoked through the black church.

From a historical perspective many of the major movements in this country started at the local governmental level and were initiated by the black church.

Consider the Civil War. Recall that the slave rebellions of note (which were local efforts) were lead by such persons as Denmark Vessey, John Brown, Beuford Prossor, Harriet Tubman, and others. All of these leaders were preachers. With the exception of one, John Brown, these revolts were lead by Black preachers.9

Consider the Civil Rights movement. E. Franklin Frazier points out that this too is an example of the black church leading the charge in community problem solving first at the local level, concluding with the establishment of federal policy.

The second issue addressed in this paper regards the pervasiveness of community on the part of the black church. By addressing this question we attain a better understanding of how effective the black church as an institutional change agent can be in implementing macro policy at the micro-systemic level.

THE PROTOTYPE: CHURCHES IN THE CITY OF DENVER

The plausibility of the black church as a universal vehicle of micro-systemic change in partnership with macro policy goals was examined through a survey used to contact and interview senior pastors in all black churches located in the Denver area. The list was the result of the collaborative work of the Denver Task Force for Cancer Among Blacks, in conjunction with the American Cancer Society and the National Cancer Institute. Other consultative sources included the Black Community Resource Directory, the Black Pages, official denominational lists, lists from

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9This is discussed in Henry Highland’s, book chapter "Nationalism, "Class Analysis, and Revolution," Slave Culture, edited by Sterling Stuckey, among other places.
local ministerial alliances, telephone yellow page directories and numerous individuals.

Is Denver Representative of the Urban Black Church?

Denver is generally representative of most cities in relation to the black church. However, there are two areas, church membership and level of community outreach in which it differs. The fact that in spite of lower than national church membership, Denver's black church provides higher than average levels of community service.

Church membership in Denver falls well below membership levels reported in previous studies of black churches in more populated regions. Researchers B.E. Mays and J.W. Nicholson, *The Negro Church*, reported median church membership of 400 with 17 percent having 1000 members. In the urban Northeastern region, Billingsley, (1990) found a higher median membership level of 156 members.

Community outreach in Denver (75 percent) was higher than the 66 to 71 percent national average reported by Billingsley and Lincoln and Mamiya, in 1991 and 1990 respectively.

Defining the Black Church in the City of Denver

A total of 164 unique churches were identified using these various sources of information. With the exception of 21 churches in local areas, the churches were located within the city of Denver, predominantly in the northeast quadrant.

The church contact information was verified through initial telephone calls to verify the senior pastors name, mailing address and telephone number. Valid telephone numbers were identified for 142 churches. Twenty-two churches were only located through their mailing addresses.

A letter of introduction was mailed describing the research initiative which was defined as an interdenominational effort to assess the effectiveness of black churches in meeting the social and economic needs of their communities.

The survey was administered during October-December, 1992 by African-American interviewers who attended a training program for such interviewing processes. The focus of their training addressed methods of approaching pastors and techniques for enhancing the response rate.
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Ultimately, interviews were conducted with 89 of 164 churches on the list, which translates into a response rate of 54 percent. In addition to the telephone interviews, semi-structured, in-person interviews were conducted with 10 of the pastors. These pastors were selected to represent a diversity of denominational affiliations as well as church sizes. The opened-ended questions from these interviews were reduced to a numerical format. All the data were analyzed using the latest version of SPSS-X, a statistical software package.

Demographic Characteristics of Denver Metropolitan Black Churches, Congregations and Senior Ministers

The denominational characteristics are as follows. Forty percent of the churches reporting were Baptist. The next largest group of churches was nondenominational, 18 percent. Approximately 10 percent of each of the following categories included the Methodists, Church of God In Christ and the Pentecostal. There were minimal numbers of other churches equaling a total 8 percent reporting themselves as Lutheran, Catholic, Presbyterian, Assembly of God and Seventh Day Adventist.

The ages of the churches ranged from four to 127 years. The median age of these churches was 24 years. The mean age was 34 years. The Methodist churches appeared to be the oldest based on a denominational comparison of the median ages.

The financial condition of the churches revealed that 40 percent of the churches operating below $50,000 per year. Approximately 29 percent of the churches reported operating budgets between $50,000 and $100,000 per year. Another 22 percent of the churches reported an operating budget between $100,000 and $500,000 per year. Finally, 4 percent reported an operating budget between $500,000-$1,000,000 per year. None of the churches reported operating budgets that exceed one million dollars.

While it is common knowledge that the churches as many other nonprofit entities use massive numbers of volunteers, 29 percent of the churches reported that even their pastors were volunteers. Another 46 percent of the churches had no paid staff. Another 33 percent had one paid employee, the clergy person. However, on the other end of the continuum 55 percent utilized at least three unpaid clergy, and 59 percent utilized unpaid staff members.

Reported church membership ranged from 10 to 2700 individuals with a median membership of 150 individuals. The mean approached 300.
A third of all responding churches reported membership levels that fell below 100. Only 10 percent reported membership levels that exceeded 500. Finally, 8 percent had 1,000 members or more.

Estimates of numbers of individuals who regularly attend services comprised approximately half of the official membership levels and ranged from eight individuals in 1900. One-half of the churches reported a number of regular attendees to be 90 individuals or more. Only three churches (3 percent) reported 1000 regularly attending members or more.

Other demographics indicated that there is a predominance of female members as shown in other studies such as Black Churches and Family-Oriented Community Outreach Programs in the Northeastern United States. In one-third of the churches, female membership was estimated to be 75 percent or higher. Only 10 percent of responding churches reported that females comprised 50 percent of the membership or less. Sixteen percent reported female membership percentages of 90 percent or higher.

The responses also indicated a heavy presence of churches with low income or with mixed low- and middle-income membership. Over 33 percent of the responding ministers said that 75 percent or more of their congregation fell into the low income category. A little less than 18 percent responded that their membership was predominantly middle income. Only three percent of the respondents characterized their congregation as primarily upper income. Another 33 percent described their membership as a mixture of two social class groups, primarily consisting of low and middle income people. Fourteen percent were characterized as being comprised of at least 15 percent membership in all income levels.

Social Outreach in Denver Black Churches

Virtually all, (n=80), of the churches reported offering at least two forms of outreach: Christian education programs and pastoral counseling. The Christian education or Sunday School programs appeared to be open to the general community and offered on a regular basis. This activity is also funded exclusively by the churches, and staffed by volunteers. Half of the church programs used five or more volunteers. Pastoral counseling, on the other hand, tended to be offered on an as-needed basis to members of the congregation rather than to the community at large. These efforts were also funded exclusively by the church and staffed by unpaid individuals, generally only one person in each church.

Another area of outreach sponsored by two-thirds of responding
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churches involved "character building" and "leadership" activities. However, since many churches mentioned these efforts in connection with their Christian education services, it was unclear whether they were distinct outreach programs or aspects of the Sunday School effort sponsored by churches. Among ministers who reported offering character building and leadership programs, about half said they were open to the community; nearly two-thirds said they were offered on a regular basis. Like Christian education, they were funded exclusively by the church and run by unpaid staff.

Still another type of program sponsored by some churches involved activities aimed at enhancing African-American heritage. Nearly a quarter of respondents reported such efforts. Twenty-five percent of these programs were offered on a regular basis.

To the question, "Is your church involved in community service outreach programs?" Forty-eight of the respondents answered affirmatively. Twelve of the negative respondents, however, indicated that they were involved in community service activities upon a closer examination of what services their churches provided.

The types of community service activities offered by the church included home nursing visits, operating prison ministries, and the organization of youth clubs open to the community. The incidence of these types of community outreach actually equalled 75 percent. In gross terms, the churches did not report targeting any specific age or ethnic group for their outreach efforts.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The picture of community outreach sponsored by black churches in Denver is one of substantial effort, aspiration and potential. Seventy-five percent of churches reported engaging in activities that could be characterized as community outreach.

Given the number and scale of black churches in Denver's African-American community, their awareness of community problems, their geographical proximity and their desire to be a vehicle for social change, public policy should aim to strengthen the churches capacity to sponsor family oriented, community outreach. There are several ways in which the outreach potential of churches may be enhanced.

One is for foundations and corporations to establish accessible funding mechanisms to support church sponsored community outreach in
targeted areas of need. Exemplary programs should be eligible for support. Application procedures and oversight processes should be designed to encourage sound grant management practices without being overly complicated and time consuming. Since most churches have not had experience preparing grant applications and lack the staff and secretarial support for submission processes, funders should be mindful of these constraints and extend technical assistance to interested applicants.

Additionally, churches might be induced to establish their own interdenominational, collaborative funding mechanisms. Like community foundations, which engage in joint fund raising and grant giving activities, churches might create a mutually support mechanism for soliciting and administering funds to support joint projects addressing community needs. In this fashion, duplications in application processes and administrative efforts would be avoided. An independent entity dedicated to community outreach also might minimize the potentially disruptive effect of doctrinal differences between and among participating churches.

Within the context of the historical summary of the First Amendment provided in this paper, there is a final implication or possibility in empowering black churches as community-based change agents. Government entities and social service agencies also should be encouraged to consider collaborations with churches for provision of services. The church is rarely utilized to its potential as an agent of information dissemination, agency communication and social services coordination. The results of pilot projects that utilize black churches in adoption, foster care and other critical human services indicates that these efforts are enhanced by active church participation. Rather than treating the church as irrelevant or an inappropriate partner for social action, public policy should aim to foster collaboration that benefit the African-American community.

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