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## **SOCIAL SERVICE FUNCTIONS OF THE CONTEMPORARY BLACK CHURCH: FINDINGS FROM THE BLACK CHURCH FAMILY PROJECT**

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The Black church traditionally has been viewed as one of the most vital institutions in the African American community (Mays & Nicholson, 1933; Frazier, 1974; Lincoln & Mamyia, 1990). Systematic investigations of the actual contributions of the church as an institutional support for improving the quality of life for African Americans, however, have been somewhat limited in the social science literature. The primary focus of most existing research has been on the importance of religion, spirituality, and church members to the psychological well-being of African Americans, especially the elderly (Taylor & Chatters, 1986; Taylor & Chatters, 1988; Chatters, Taylor, & Jackson, 1985; Chatters, Taylor, & Jackson, 1986; Walls & Zarit, 1991). This article summarizes our recent research which demonstrates that Black churches as a group can form an infrastructure for providing organized support and needed services to African Americans in a variety of situations. It also highlights specific types of church-based health and social services being provided to members of the community-at-large.

While worship activities continue to be the fundamental function of the church, it is not the only emphasis of most Black churches. The dual responsibility of the Black church to serve both the spiritual and social service needs of the African American community was evident as far back as the establishment of the Free African Society in 1787 by Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and others. The Free African Society was a benevolent organization that provided charitable services within a slave society prior to the establishment of the first African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia in 1794 (Mukenge, 1983). For many Black churches, regardless of denomination, responding to those in need historically has been an integral part of their ministries.

### **BLACK CHURCHES AS SOCIAL SERVICE INSTITUTIONS**

To test the plausibility of the proposition that contemporary Black churches continue to function as social service institutions, Dr. Andrew Billingsley and his colleagues recently mounted a national study of the family-oriented community-outreach programs sponsored by Black churches to assist non-church members called: The Black Church Family Project. This study is the first attempt to obtain a national probability sample of Black churches in the continental United States. It uses the same sampling frame as the National Survey of Black Americans (Jackson, 1991), and makes the

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assumption that Black churches are distributed in a similar manner as Black households. To date, data from 635 northern Black churches have been analyzed and the results from several studies based on this data are presented below.

Although the contemporary Black church no longer holds the role of primary community center it once held in Black communities due, in part, to better access to societal resources since the Civil Rights movement (Lincoln & Mamyia, 1990), it continues to be an institutional base for the provision of an array of services. Consistent with the results of Lincoln and Mamyia's (1990) landmark study of African American ministers, data from The Black Church Family Project indicate that two-thirds of the respondent churches operate at least one outreach program designed to meet community needs, while approximately one-third of the churches surveyed reported that they do not operate any such program. Black churches that sponsored community-outreach programs tended to have greater resources (e.g., older church, more members, paid ministers, owner's of church building, and educated senior ministers involved in community activities) than those that did not.

Out of a total of approximately 1,800 church-based support programs offered by 425 Black churches, the majority (51%) were designed to assist families. Many of these programs tried to meet the needs of the family as a unit (e.g., family counseling services; day care), or adults family members (e.g., aid to the incarcerated; male discussion groups). Children and youth programs also accounted for a substantial portion of these programs (31%), while programs specifically for the elderly (8%) and community development (10%) were provided to a lesser extent (Caldwell, Greene, & Billingsley, in press).

When community development programs were eliminated and family programs (n=1,683) were examined regarding the functional support being provided to families, instrumental aid, such as distributing food and clothing, and providing shelter, was by far, the most frequently offered assistance (46%). Emotional support, as provided through family counseling, and women's and men's groups, was also available in 28% of church programs. Those services which incorporated both instrumental and expressive functions, such as cultural and recreational programs, accounted for 26% of church outreach activities (Caldwell, Greene & Billingsley, 1992). We also found that volunteers provided the staffing for almost all church-based activities and that most of these volunteers were females (Caldwell, Greene, & Billingsley, 1992). These findings document the influential role that African American women assume in church outreach activities; however, women represented only three percent of the senior ministers in this sample, which suggests that leadership roles for women within Black churches remain limited.

Subsequent analyses targeting specific African American populations revealed that the amount and types of programs offered to particular groups were sometimes limited.

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Caldwell, Chatters, Billingsley, and Taylor (in press) provide an analysis of the types of services that Black churches offered for the elderly. They found that home care services (such as house cleaning) accounted for the largest portion of available services at 39% of the 153 elderly programs sponsored. Fellowship or social activities for the elderly was the next largest group (18%), followed by meals-on-wheels (10%), senior citizen housing (9%), multi-services (5%) and various other programs (19%). As mentioned earlier, elderly programs represented only a small fraction (8%) of the total number of programs sponsored by Black churches. This finding is surprising since the elderly comprise a large portion of the church memberships and a large percentage of the African American elderly are poor. It could be that other health and human service agencies are effectively addressing the fundamental needs of the elderly or that African American elderly may be using other resources or have greater unmet needs than other age groups of African Americans. Future research should help to clarify this issue.

Programs targeting adolescent non-church members were provided by 176 churches. The majority of these programs were teen support groups (39%) and recreational activities (31%). Programs established for substance abuse assistance accounted for 15% of youth programs, while AIDS awareness (3%) and other health-related services (2%) were least common (Rubin, Billingsley, & Caldwell, in press). These findings suggest that most churches provide diversionary activities for adolescents, while some of the tougher issues related to adolescent health are not being confronted through available church programs. On the other hand, encouraging and supporting the educational achievements of African American children and youth remain a high priority with 11% of the more than 1,800 programs offered by churches being formal educational assistance programs. Head Start-type programs, after-school academic supports, and the operation of educational institutions are examples of the types of educational support programs offered by these churches (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991).

In an effort to investigate the community health outreach role of Black churches, Thomas, Quinn, Billingsley, and Caldwell (in press) examined the characteristics of churches involved in health promotion activities. The most common types of health programs offered were drug abuse prevention activities and health education workshops. The results of a logistic regression analysis identified congregational size and education of the senior minister as the best predictors of whether or not churches sponsored programs to encourage better health and health behaviors within African American communities. Specifically, larger church memberships and having senior ministers with more education were the most typical characteristics of churches involved in health promotion activities. As with Eng, Hatch, and Callan's (1985) study, these findings support the idea that Black churches can play an important role in reaching hard to reach populations with regard to the delivery of health services.

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## CONCLUSIONS

This examination of the role that contemporary Black churches can play in supporting African American families and communities provides evidence that many Black churches are willing and able to be significant institutional supports not only for church members, but for members of the community-at-large. The challenge for the future is how to effectively expand the types of services being provided within Black churches for specific populations and to link their community outreach services to formal systems of service delivery so that a more comprehensive network of services can be provided for African American families and communities.

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