

---

---

## THE BLACK CHURCH AND CHARITABLE CHOICE

R. Khari Brown, Social Work and Sociology, University of Michigan

### Introduction

Close to two-thirds of black clergy (Chaves, 1999) and over eighty percent (Pew, 2001) of blacks in general believe that their churches should be able to receive federal funding for their social service efforts. Blacks' support for this policy idea is largely a support for the principles behind section 104 of P.L. 104-93, commonly referred to as the "Charitable Choice Clause," of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA) of 1996. Under Charitable Choice, sectarian agencies, such as churches, became eligible for federal funding that would enable them to provide social welfare programs. It stands to reason that an overwhelming number of blacks support federal funding for church-based social service efforts because many believe that such an opportunity could improve their church's ability to serve their communities. This is sensible given that black churches are disproportionately located in communities of heightened joblessness, welfare families, and poverty. In addition, black churches are often the only non-governmental service provider in their communities (see Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; see Billingsley, 1999). Blacks' approval of this policy idea may also be related to the prominent role black clergy have played in President Bush's platform to expand faith-based social service efforts in this country during the first year of his Presidency. In March 2001, he held another meeting where he summoned leaders of the Congress of National Black Churches to the White House for a meeting on the government's role in aiding faith-based service efforts (see Green, 2001). In June 2001, he held another faith-based summit with 500 religious leaders, most of which were black or Hispanic. However, just because black pastors believe that they should be able to receive public funds and some black pastors have featured prominently in Bush's campaign to expand faith-based efforts in this country, it does not mean that a large sum of federal funds will be flowing to black churches. To be clear, Charitable Choice is not a pot of money reserved for faith-based social service efforts. It only allows religious organizations to take part in a competitive grant writing process where applicants must prove their ability to provide quality social services (CPJ, 2001). Whether or not black churches can produce fundable proposals, and are capable of administering large-scale service projects, are important questions that get at the central issue of whether Charitable Choice dollars are real possibilities for many African American church-based social service efforts.

The capacity of black churches to successfully secure and administer public funded social service programs is similar to the process that leads to a successful social movement. Resource mobilization theory suggests that successful social movements

---

---

are the result of political opportunity and the presence of resources among the aggrieved group, which allow them to take advantage of such an opportunity (McAdam, 1982). In this context, successfully securing and administering publicly funded social service programs represents a successful movement. The Charitable Choice legislation itself represents the political opportunity. And, black churches' leadership and administrative capacity to provide large-scale publicly funded programs represent their social resources.

Few black churches, however, possess the requisite resources to take advantage of this policy. If black churches are able to benefit from this favorable legislation, they will likely require assistance from either funding agencies or private capacity building organizations to strengthen their social service capacity. By examining black churches' social service experience, their leadership capacity, their membership and staff base, and their financial resources, this paper will provide an approximation of the number of black churches that would most likely benefit from such assistance.

### **The Social Service Capacity of Black Churches**

Most black churches have some experience providing social services. 70%-90% of black churches in the United States participate in providing social service programs in their communities (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Billingsley, 1999; Dash, Rasor & Chapman, 2000). Human service provision, such as food and clothing distribution, shelter, and emergency money are the most prevalent services that churches offer. This is followed by adolescent and youth programs, elderly support programs, mental and physical health programs, economic development, day care, substance abuse, and a host of other programs (Billingsley, 1999; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Walter & Brown, 1979; Dilulio, 1998; MDBC, 1998; Chang et al., 1994; Thomas et al., 1994; Dash, Rasor & Chapman, 2000). Over half of black churches in this country participate in providing at least two such social service programs and over forty percent are involved in providing at least three such social service programs to their communities (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Thomas et al., 1994; MDCBI, 1998; Dash, Rasor & Chapman, 2000).

That 70-90% of black churches are *involved* in the provision of social services is a bit deceiving given that few actually provide these services *themselves*. The majority of black churches provide their space, a small amount of money and in-kind donations, and volunteers for well-defined periodic tasks to a total of six service organizations (Ammerman, 2001; Chaves & Tsitsos, 2001; see Vidal, 2001). For example, of all the affordable housing programs supported by congregations, 73% are actually conducted by other organizations (Vidal, 2001).

Another indication of black churches' limited social service capacity is that few are involved in providing long-term and capital-intensive social services (Metro-Denver,

---

---

1998; Chaves, 1999; Ammerman, 2000; Dash, Rasor & Chapman, 2000). A recent national survey of close to 2,000 black churches found that less than half were involved in the provision of professional and capital-intensive services such as computer training or job training/placement programs. Services much more frequently provided include emergency financial aid, which 86% of churches offer, emergency food, which 75% of churches offer, and counseling, which 66% of churches offer (Dash, Rasor & Chapman, 2000). Few of these programs are provided on a regular basis. The Metro Denver Black Church Initiative (1998) reports that less than a third of Denver's black churches provide food bank services, the most commonly offered outreach program, on a regular basis. Most church leaders indicated that they simply do not have the staff or financial capacity to provide more services.

The limited experience that most black churches have in providing programs on a regular basis over a long period of time casts doubt on their ability to manage and administer public funded social service programs. To understand why black churches are limited in the social services they can provide, it is important to understand the leadership and administrative resources upon which they rely.

### **Clergy Leadership**

A church's capacity to engage in social service delivery has much to do with the pastor's vision for the church. This is largely because churches, like other organizations, tend to model the behavior of their leaders (see Harris, 1998). Pastors' capability to set their church's agenda is made evident by the fact that pastors that define their church's mission in terms of advocacy or service provision are more involved in their community than churches with missions that are purely evangelical or are concerned only with their members' welfare (Ammerman, 2000; Dash, Chapman & Rasor, 2000). Few black pastors, however, place a priority on social service delivery. In fact, less than 1% of black pastors define their primary role in the church as a civic leader (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990) and approximately 15% view the primary function of the church to be social change (Ammerman, 2000). The primary leadership role of the majority of black pastors is one of worship leader (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Ammerman, 2000). This suggests that while the majority of black pastors support the idea of receiving public funds for their social service projects, few will likely dedicate a large amount of their church's resources to investigating funding opportunities or in administering large-scale publicly funded programs.

That many pastors rank social service provision as a rather low priority is likely related to the fact that most have to divide their time between their church and an outside job due to financial necessity. Research suggests that the more paid clergy churches rely upon, the more social programs they are able to offer. Nearly three-fourths of black churches in the Northeastern and Northcentral regions of this country with at least

---

---

one paid clergy on staff are involved in providing community health outreach programs (Thomas et al., 1994). Conversely, less than half of black churches with no paid clergy on staff are involved in providing these programs. The reality, however, is that few black churches are able to give their pastors the necessary financial security to work only one job. Nearly one-third of black churches do not have a paid pastor (Thomas et al., 1994; MDCBI, 1998) and over half of black pastors work other occupations out of financial need (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

Another factor that limits black pastors' ability to launch more capital-intensive programs is their relatively low level of education. Churches under the leadership of college educated pastors are more likely than other churches to have youth, community health, economic development, and human service programs (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Thomas et al., 1994; Chang et al., 1994). This is largely because college education tends to socialize individuals toward understanding how bureaucratic organizations operate and the importance of formal procedures in accomplishing complex tasks. As such, college educated pastors are more likely than lesser educated pastors to work with more formal service providers that can provide them in-kind support, technical assistance, and the opportunity to refer those they are unable to help to professionals or agencies that can (Chang et al., 1994; Billingsley, 1999). However, less than half of black churches are under the pastoralship of college educated pastors (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Thomas et al., 1994). And, only about 10-20% of black clergy nationwide have completed their professional training at an accredited divinity school or seminary (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Dash, Rasor & Chapman, 2000).

There are also a number of structural reasons why educated pastors and those whose sole job is that of senior pastor are more likely than their counterparts to support or lead church-based or sponsored outreach efforts. These pastors tend to pastor larger churches, with a more educated church body, with larger budgets, and more paid clergy and non-clergy staff persons (Billingsley, 1999; MDCBI, 1998; Ammerman, 2000; Dash, Chapman & Rasor, 2000). This enables these pastors to establish ties and develop collaborative relationships with community groups that can assist them in the provision of social programs. However, as indicated above, churches led by these type of pastors represent a minority of all black churches.

Given pastoral priorities, it is sensible that the majority of pastors that have to divide their time between their pastoralship and other jobs are going to spend their limited pastoral duties performing worship services, and not facilitating community partnerships for the purpose of community service provision. Even for pastors that view social service of the highest import, relatively few have the human capital to turn their visions into programs. This suggests that few churches have the pastoral leadership that would allow them to secure public funds for social service purposes.

---

---

### **Administrative Resources of Black Churches and Service Delivery**

The administrative structure that most churches rely upon to perform their tasks is not conducive to providing social services on a regular basis over a long period. This is largely because most churches' organizational structure resembles that of a voluntary association. These organizations tend to be informally run, take primary interests in meeting the social-emotional needs of their members, rely upon non-professionals to perform tasks, and rely upon relatively weak incentives to motivate action (Knoke & Prenskey, 1984; Harris, 1998). As such, most churches are not well suited to handle large-scale social service projects.

Because church members expect social-emotional support, friendship, and general fellowship, the committees they form to address church-related issues tend to tolerate more gossip and non-business-like behavior than formal organizations (Harris, 1998). This type of organizational culture works well with providing mutual benefit or social support to those in need, because it is seen as keeping an eye open for people in need of help. However, the idea of ongoing regular commitment to strangers or non-members in a time-efficient and effective manner is outside the associational model due to the high level of standardization and professionalization that is required.

Pastors tend to be effective in mobilizing congregants for voluntary action. However, even they must tread lightly if they expect continued church participation. This is largely because pastors are only able to rely upon normative and affective incentives to motivate action. While these are important incentives, they carry less weight than utilitarian ones in sanctioning behavior and convincing members to follow suggestions or orders. The lack of strong sanctions is largely due to the central voluntary feature of these organizations. Members come and go as they please. If they are unhappy because they feel they are being overworked and/or underappreciated, they can vote with their feet and leave (Knoke & Prenskey, 1984; Harris, 1998). This has implications on effectiveness because some volunteers believe that it is inappropriate to be seriously monitored on work they are doing in a voluntary capacity, even if it is done incorrectly.

In addition to not having an administrative structure to provide effective social services programs, few churches have the volunteers, paid staff, and financial resources to provide such programs. An examination of the amount of administrative resources churches possess should provide a greater understanding of why only a minority of black churches will likely secure federal funding to finance their social programs.

***Church Membership Size.*** Few churches have the membership base to commit a large number of volunteers to administer their social service projects. Research indicates that the largest 1% (> 900 members) of all congregations in this country provide about

---

---

one-quarter of the money directly spent by congregations on social service activity. The largest 10% (> 500 members) account for more than half the money that all congregations spend on social service activity (Chaves, 2001). The implication of these findings is that the majority of small to medium-sized churches commit relatively little money to their social service efforts.

While larger churches tend to have the financial resources and the volunteer reserve to provide more social programs, most black churches do not have large active membership bases. Approximately 90% have less than 350 active members, over half have less than 100 members, and 28% have less than fifty members. The median-sized black church is between one hundred and one hundred and fifty members (Dash, Rasor & Chapman, 2000). The plethora of small to medium-sized black churches suggests that most are able to rely upon a relatively small volunteer labor force to provide the majority of the services they provide or sponsor. Furthermore, most churches rely upon a small amount of volunteers to provide their social services. The typical or median congregation engaged in social service activity relies upon ten volunteers to provide the social services they offer or sponsor (Chaves, 1999). And, in eighty percent of congregations engaged in such activities, fewer than thirty volunteers are mobilized for social service work during the course of the year (Chaves, 1999).

Given the reality of most churches' reliance upon a small volunteer reserve, it is likely that only a small minority of black churches have the person-power to search for and apply for external funding to finance their programs. And, even if somehow many were able to secure such funding, most do not have the volunteer base to administer publicly funded programs.

**Staffing Issues.** Few churches have adequate paid staff persons to help develop and administer social services. The more paid staff churches are able to rely upon, the more time they can commit to initiating and overseeing the provision of social service programs, establishing ties to other faith-based and secular social service organizations, and possibly even to search for external funding for their social programs. Research indicates that nearly eighty percent of black churches with at least one staff person are involved in providing community outreach programs. Conversely, much fewer (fifty-six percent) of churches that do not have any paid staff persons provide such programs (Thomas et al., 1994). However, fewer than half of black churches have one paid non-clergy staff person (Thomas et al., 1994; MDCBI, 1998). And, the overwhelming majority of staff churches employ are musicians, custodians, and secretaries. Close to 80% of all black churches have a paid musician. This is slightly higher than having a paid custodian – 72% do so – and a secretary – 69% do so (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

That few churches have a paid staff person that is dedicated to the oversight of

---

---

community outreach efforts lends credence to Chaves's (1999) argument that most churches do not have enough staff persons to run programs on a sustained basis, and/or could spend time searching, applying for, and overseeing the implementation of federally funded programs. Only 6% of all congregations and 12% of congregations that report some degree of social service involvement have a staff person devoting at least 25% of their time to social service projects (Chaves, 1999). The limited staff that churches are able to commit to social service efforts is further evidence of black churches' limited social service capacity, which would allow them to search for and administer publicly funded social service programs.

***Church Finances.*** Financial resources are arguably the most central aspect of a church's resource pool because they affect their ability to provide the service itself. Greater financial resources also allow churches to finance the necessary supplies to administer their social service programs. The Metro Denver Black Church Initiative (1998) found that half of churches with budgets under \$50,000 reported delivering social services. In contrast, 83% of churches with budgets between \$50,000 and \$100,000, 94% of churches with budgets between \$100,000 and \$500,000, and all churches with budgets above \$500,000 reported doing so. Even if not providing services themselves, wealthier churches tend to make more financial contributions than less affluent congregations to non-denominational outreach organizations (Ammerman, 2000). The greater financial ties that wealthier churches have with community organizations also likely contributes to the fact that wealthier organizations are more heavily engaged than less affluent congregations in partnered social service provision with community organizations.

The financial health of black churches is not clear. One national survey of black pastors conducted by the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) reports that close to two-thirds of black churches indicated being in good financial health (Dash, Rasor & Chapman, 2000). Another national survey conducted by the ITC, this time of black church members reports that more than fifty-four percent of black church members surveyed reported serious financial problems in their individual congregations. There is less confusion, however, concerning the amount of church funds being directed to social service efforts. The average black church contributes \$727 per year to community service organizations (Ammerman, 2000). This is consistent with the national trend of congregational support for social service efforts. The median dollar amount spent by congregations directly in support of social service programs is about \$1,200 (Chaves, 2001). This level of spending represents between 2%-4% of the median congregation's total budget. This level of financial commitment to social service efforts is simply not enough to administer \$150,000 and above county and/or state contracts that require organizations to initially provide services and then wait to be reimbursed and even continue to provide programs when government payments are late. Churches' low level of financial commitment to social service efforts suggests



---

---

that most congregations are not financially prepared to undertake the implementation of federally funded programs.

### **Charitable Choice for the Talented 10%-15%**

Dubois's notion that the fate of the black community rests upon the shoulders of a talented 10% of professional blacks to improve the well-being of the masses is applicable to the population of social service oriented churches. Only a few black churches have the leadership and administrative capacity to lead the charge in securing public funding for community building purposes. It is likely that 10%-15% of black churches will be able to provide federally funded social services to their communities. This elite group of churches tend to be led by pastors with a commitment to community building that lead large (> 400 members), financially well off (> \$100,000 budget) churches with more paid staff persons. However, even for this elite group of churches, it is far from guaranteed that they will be able to secure federal funding for their programs. Currently, between 3%-6% of black churches are receiving such funding (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Chaves, 1998). This suggests that, despite Charitable Choice, even black churches that are relatively proficient at providing social services will likely require assistance from private and/or public social service institutions to make them a more attractive funding option. Assistance from public agencies and private agencies could be critical resources that the top 10%-15% of black churches need to attain federal funding to provide effective social services in their communities. A reformation of the grant and contract process would also lead to the greater involvement of churches and FBOs in the application process.

### **How Can Granting Agencies Help? Capacity Building**

**Capacity Building.** Capacity building involves strengthening organizations so they can better achieve their mission (Connolly, 2001). Government agencies that provide grant-funding to FBOs to obtain assistance in staff and board training, strategic planning, assistance in record keeping and auditing could help strengthen an organization's ability to accomplish their goals (De Vita, Fleming & Twombly, 2001).

Ultimately, capacity building can be potentially beneficial to both government funding agencies and churches seeking funding. It increases the capacity of churches to secure and effectively administer publicly funded programs. And, it permits government agencies to live up to their stance of community empowerment by investing in community institutions to develop quality programs in their communities. Investing in church capacity building is also a wise investment because it permits these community institutions to provide quality programs beyond the duration of one grant period or contract cycle (see Backer, 2001). In the long run, this could save state or county tax dollars that could be put to other uses, as more capable community institutions are



---

---

able to serve their communities. To the extent that government agencies are willing to identify and possibly even provide funding for these services, churches' ability to provide effective services and therefore prove worthy of public funding will be greatly increased.

***Information Sharing.*** If the most capable black churches are to have a reasonable chance securing the federal funding that so many desire, they must first be aware that such opportunities exist. Federal discretionary grant programs typically announce the availability of funds in the Federal Register and on the program's or the respective department's website (White House, 2001). A first step that state and/or local social service offices can take to increase activist church leaders' awareness of funding opportunities is to add them to their mailing lists (Sherman, 2000). An important second step would be to invite these churches to bidders conferences to inform them of what the application process entails and what is expected of them if awarded funding.

If granting agencies feel it cumbersome to identify all potentially interested congregations, they could fund intermediary organizations to do this task for them. Intermediaries tend to be familiar with the faith community, the government programs, and with successful faith-based programs that serve as best practices (Backer, 2001; De Vita et al., 2001). Because these organizations have more contact with congregations, they would be more aware of churches that could realistically benefit from such funding information. Funding intermediaries to mobilize and recruit clergy for bidders conferences would also be a more efficient use of government agencies' time spent hoping to reach the faith community.

Informing churches of available funding opportunities is an important role that both government and private social service agencies can take to increase the chances that competent churches will apply for and secure such funding.

***Restructuring Pay-for-Performance Contracts.*** The current state of contract provision essentially disqualifies most churches and smaller FBOs due to the large start-up costs that many capable churches are unable to provide. As stated earlier in the proposal, pay-for-performance contracts require organizations to have an adequate amount of seed money to provide services and later be reimbursed once they meet certain specified goals. Even for the talented 10%-15% of congregations identified earlier, these pay-for-performance contracts put a large financial strain on their ability to initially provide these government sponsored social services to their communities. One recommendation is for counties to offer congregations some start-up funding or offer low-income loans to help them with the initial provision of these contracted social services. This would make it easier for congregations to provide these services without worrying as much about paying staff persons, keeping their programs fully

---

---

operational, or tapping too deeply into congregational coffers to provide these social services.

### Conclusion

This ability of black churches to secure public funding to provide social services is a salient domestic policy issue given President Bush's endorsement and encouragement of religious organizations to take on a much more assertive civil societal role in their communities. Furthermore, prominent African American church community activists, such as Rev. Eugene Rivers, the Executive Director of the Ten-Point Coalition in Boston, are accepting and indeed calling for churches to play a larger role in attacking poverty, crime, and general social disorganization within black neighborhoods (see Stream & Zoba). Charitable Choice may make it easier for black churches to improve their communities through the provision of government funded social services. However, this policy will likely only benefit the top 10%-15% of black churches that are capable of large-scale social service programs. And, even for these talented 10%-15% of black churches, it is unlikely that they will secure such funding unless they receive capacity building assistance. Changes in agency practices that make funding opportunities more accessible to smaller community-based organizations like black churches are also needed to greater ensure that black churches can secure public funds to better serve their communities.

### References

Ammerman, Nancy T. (2001). *Doing Good in American Communities: Congregations and Service Organizations Working Together*. A Research Report from the Organizing Religious Work Project Hartford Institute for Religion Research Hartford Seminary.

Backer, Thomas E. (2002). Strengthening nonprofits: Foundation initiatives for non-profit organizations. In Carol J. De Vita & Cory Fleming (Eds.), *Building Capacity in Nonprofit Organizations*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.

Billingsley, Andrew. (1999). *Mighty like a river: The black church and social reform*. New York: Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chang, Patricia M.Y., David R. Williams, Ezra E.H. Griffith & John Young. (1994). Church agency relationships in the black community. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 23(2): 91-105.

Chaves, Mark. (1999). Religious congregations and welfare reform: Who will take advantage of "charitable choice?" *American Sociological Review*, 64(6): 836-846.

---

---

Chaves, Mark. (2001). Religious congregations and welfare reform. *Society*, 38(2): 21-27.

Chaves, Mark & William Tsitsos. (2001). Congregations and social services: What they do, how they do it, and with whom. *Nonprofit Sector Research Fund Working Paper Series: The Aspen Institute*. Spring.

Center for Public Justice (CPJ). (2001). *A Guide to Charitable Choice*. www.cpjustice.org.

Dash, Michael I.N., Stephen Rasor & Christine Chapman. (2000). *Interdenominational Theological Center/Faithfactor Project 2000: Final Research Report: The Gallup Organization*. November.

De Vita, Carol J., Cory Fleming & Eric C. Twombly. (2001). Building nonprofit capacity: A framework for addressing the problem. In Carol J. De Vita & Cory Fleming (Eds.), *Building Capacity in Nonprofit Organizations*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.

Dilulio Jr., John J. (1998). Living Faith: The Black Church Outreach Tradition: Report 98-3, Senior Fellow, Manhattan Institute, Director, The Jeremiah Project: History of Outreach.

Green, Joshua. (2001). Bad faith. *The American Prospect*, 12(13): 12-14.

Harris, Margaret. (1998). *Organizing God's work*. Great Britain: McMillan Press LTD.

Knoke, David & David Prensky. (1984). What relevance do organization theories have for voluntary associations? *Social Science Quarterly* 65: 3-20.

Lincoln, C. Eric & Lawrence H. Mamiya. (1990). *The black church in the African American experience*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

McAdam, Doug. (1982). *Political process and the development of black insurgency, 1930-1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

The Metro Denver Black Church Initiative (MDBCI). (1998). Annual Report.

Pew Charitable Trusts Survey. (2001). Faith-Based Funding Backed, But Church-State Doubts. <http://pewforum.org/events/0410/report/execsum.php3>

Sherman, Amy L. (2000). *The Growing Impact of Charitable Choice: A Catalogue of New Collaborations Between Government and Faith-Based Organizations in Nine*

---

---

States. (March). The Center for Public Justice. Washington, D.C. [www.cpjustice.org](http://www.cpjustice.org)

Stream, Carol & Wendy Murray Zoba. (1996). Separate and equal. *Christianity Today*, 40(2): 14+.

Thomas, Stephen B., Quinn, Sandra C., Billingsley, Andrew & Caldwell, Cleopatra. (1994). Characteristics of northern black churches with community outreach programs. *American Journal of Public Health*, 84(4): 575-579.

Vidal, Avis C. (2001). Faith-based organizations in community development. *U.S. Department of Housing and Community Development: Office of Policy Development and Research*.

Walters, Ronald W. & Diane R. Brown. (1979). *Exploring the Role of the Black Church in the Community*. Mental Health Research and Development Center Institute for Urban Affairs and Research, Howard University.

White House. (2001). *Unlevel Playing Field: Barriers to Participation by Faith-Based and Community Organizations in Federal Social Service Programs*, August. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/08/unlevelfield.html>