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Am I My Brother's Keeper?:
The Contested Role of African American Churches in
Community Development

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In the age of mega-churches with sprawling campuses whose locations are determined by the presence of an abundance of land, not a historic connection to a particular community, many church leaders have a relatively expansive interpretation of their "community", often coupled with an inward focus on their ministerial obligations. This perspective contrasts with the expectations of many community leaders that envision an outwardly focused, localized outreach model for churches. This tension is further complicated by the increasing size of churches and the emergence of a relatively new religious doctrine that emphasizes individual efforts and material gain, possibly leading churches to adopt even more insular activities, pulling them further away from the model desired by many community leaders. While local communities may be in more need of the assistance of area churches, churches are increasingly not in need of them. Through a series of interviews, participant observation, and archival research in a large southern metro area, this paper examines the competing visions of the church's "community" and the various interpretations of the church's responsibilities to these communities.

Introduction

On January 29, 2001 President George W. Bush signed Executive Order 13199 establishing the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, stating that "[f]aith-based and other community organizations are indispensable in meeting the needs of poor Americans and distressed neighborhoods" (Executive Order 13199). Bush's signing of this Executive Order was the continuation of a trend within the United States towards expecting religious organizations to offset the diminishing social safety net that was once the responsibility of the United States government. Between 1996 and 2000, President Bill Clinton signed a series of legislative acts known as Charitable Choice that allowed the federal government to provide direct funding to religious organizations that offer a specific category of social services. Though offering government funding to faith-based organizations was and is controversial, the belief that these organizations play an important role in providing services and promoting change within communities, for the most part, is not. On a national and local level there is an expectation that faith-based organizations can and should aid in community development.

Nowhere is this expectation greater than within the African American community. African Americans continue to be labeled as the most religious racial/ethnic group within the United States. African Americans are more likely to pray privately, say grace before eating, attend religious services, and believe the Bible is the literal word of God (Jacobson, Heaton, and Dennis 1990; Johnson, Matre, and Armbrecht 1991; Putnam and Campbell 2010). Farnsley (2003, 37) determined in his work that African Americans were much more likely than whites to use their religious beliefs to make financial and political decisions. The importance of religion and the church to African Americans today is not surprising considering how deeply entwined African American community development has been with the evolution of the African American

church.

Churches have been important actors in the provision of social services within the African American community, dating back to the post-Civil War period (Harris 2001). Starting in the mid-19th century following the abolition of slavery, the African American church experienced immense organizational growth as it increasingly became the center of African American life. It served not only as a place of worship, but also the springboard for future political, economic, and social organizing. Urban churches in particular, possessing more members and relatively more resources than their rural counterparts, were extremely active. They offered an array of services, ranging from helping the sick and former prison inmates to meeting basic needs such as providing food and clothing. Sometimes through partnerships with others, they founded hospitals, orphanages, and nursing homes. As rural African American migrants streamed to the cities, many African American churches aided in the transition to a foreign urban environment (Montgomery 1993).

The church also played an important role in developing an educational system for African American children. Predominantly white religious societies did play a leading role in forming schools, but local African American congregants were also instrumental in creating and sustaining educational programs. They often pulled together what meager resources they possessed to pay teachers' salaries or provide them with shelter, buy school supplies, and acquire classroom space (Montgomery 1993, 148).

The African American church also provided an incubator for early African American enterprises. Most beneficial/benevolent and burial societies were originally started in or in association with churches. They were formed to help during times of death and sickness. Over time these societies developed into insurance associations, some of the first African American

owned enterprises (Harris 2001, 142; Dubois 1898). The seeds of political, economic, and educational development were all first planted by the church. Because of this rich history of the church aiding in community advancement, many actors still look to African American churches to play a crucial role as agents of change within their communities.

Though there is widespread agreement that the church is critical to solving community problems, there is disagreement amongst African American community leaders on how the church should do this. Although many community leaders prefer a cooperative, outwardly-oriented church, focused on the local community and systemic change, they accuse most churches of adopting a more inwardly-focused, insulated model, focusing on problems at the individual level. This tension, or misalignment of expectations, appears only to be exacerbated by the increasing influence of the Prosperity Gospel, mega-churches, and neo-liberalism within the US religious field. The goal of this paper is to examine the divergent expectations of the church and its relationship with the surrounding community, and to suggest possible implications of this divergence for effective community development.

Research Methods

The data collected for this paper comes from a larger study conducted in a large southern metro area from 2010-2012. Throughout this paper, this metro area will be referred to as "Jefferson". The information used in this paper was culled from interviews, participant observation, and archival research. Through snowball sampling, I recruited 18 community leaders with whom I conducted approximately one-hour long, semi-structured interviews to gather their opinions about the role of local churches within their community. The primary requirement was that they had some role in the community that put them in a position to work

with or observe local church behavior. Interviewees ranged from executives of local non-profits and development organizations to consultants for religious organizations. Though the economic status of the interviewees varied, almost all were highly educated African Americans who attended an area church and varied in age from 23-66.

Next, after site visits and Internet searches, I contacted local mega-churches to ask if they would participate in my project. A mega-church is a Protestant church with an average weekend service attendance of at least 2000 people (Thumma and Travis 2007; Hartford Institute for Religion Research 2014). Four churches with at least 4000 members and doctrinal beliefs varying roughly along a Prosperity Gospel-Traditional Doctrine continuum allowed me to conduct semi-structured interviews of active church members. The churches recruited the participants because they were better able to identify members that consistently participated in church activities versus those who just attended a couple of Sundays each month. The rationale for seeking active members was the belief that people highly involved in the church might have views that more closely approximate their church's stance on doctrinal issues and that they had more accurate knowledge of their church's ministries. Most interviewees were administrators or ministers within their church. As a group, ranging in age from 28-63, they were highly educated and solidly middle- to upper-middle class with the exception of a few who had been adversely affected by the 2008 economic downturn. All were of African descent. I conducted five interviews with members from each church, with questions that touched on their beliefs about the church's role in the community, their own church's ministries, attitudes toward the poor, and the relationship between finances and faithfulness, amongst other matters. I digitally recorded all interviews and then had them transcribed by a third party. I later coded the interviews using Atlas.ti computer software. I replaced the names of all people and places with pseudonyms.

I also conducted four weeks of participant-observation at each church, attending Sunday and weekday services and other church programs to see firsthand what activities the various churches were prioritizing and who they were targeting.

Church and Community

The church is one of many actors working on a local level trying to effect community change. In the metro area where I based my research, however, almost all of the community activists I interviewed had some affiliation with an area church. This is not surprising considering that in the urban South the church remains what Christopher Ellison and Darren Sherkat (1995) call the "semi-voluntary institution," meaning that participation in church activities is strongly influenced by social norms and expectations. Ellison and Sherkat show that this social pressure is stronger amongst more educated African Americans within the South, which includes almost all of my community activist interviewees.

At points in this paper, it may seem that I am making an artificial dichotomous comparison between the "church" view and the "community" view. That is not my intention. Each of the interviewees provide an authentic voice of both the church and community in some way. The interviewees I categorize as "church leaders" and "community leaders" do differ, however, in one important respect. Those that I call "community leaders" were chosen because their primary interaction with the community is through the lens of their non-profit organization, whereas the primary interaction with the community of those categorized as "church leaders" is through the lens of their church. The fact that they are actively engaging the community through the mechanisms of their particular organization is why I divided these interviewees into these separate categories. I believe the following pages support my initial supposition that the entities

through which the interviewees interact with the community influenced their priorities, what they saw as community problems, and even who they saw as "the community."

I use the term "the church" throughout this paper. I am aware that religious institutions within the African American community are diverse, and some of that diversity is reflected in this paper. Approximately 80 percent of people of African descent, however, identify as Christians, with the vast majority belonging to Protestant denominations (Pew Research Center 2009). For this reason, this paper adopts the convention, found in scholarly and popular discourse, of using the term "the church" to refer to the collective of African American Christian religious institutions.

Agreement

Within the study, though there are serious divergences between many non-profit actors and churches about the role of the church in facilitating community development, there is one issue about which there is little dispute. Most actors agree that the church should play a central or leadership role in the transformation of their communities. Many interviewees positively referenced a time when the church was the primary African American controlled institution within their neighborhoods. Chris Peters, an active member of a large Baptist church, recalled the following:

> The role the church should play in the community is a leading role, in? not just family matters but community matters. I believe the church's role in the community should set the tone for the community on how the community goes about their way of life, daily living, even to the extent of taking care of each other. This is how it used to be, even when I was young. I know from my mom and my parents growing up. Everything that started, started with the church. The church's role is the centerpiece of the community. The community is in need, the church is there.

There were also many references by the interviewees to a perhaps romanticized, but

persistent, characterization of the church's leadership role during the Civil Rights Movement (Harris 2001, 144-45). Dante Peters, the head of a community development organization in a Jefferson neighborhood, stated, "[T]his isn't a conversation that our churches are having as it relates to how they can help to be the change agents in neighborhoods, versus when you think about the Civil Rights Movement. The churches were the change agents." Clarence Johnson, a minister of a local Baptist church, seconded Dante Peters' view, though perhaps in less critical terms, when asked what the role of the church should be:

> To be a change agent. That change agent is really to bring Jesus Christ into the neighborhood and demonstrate the love of Christ in the neighborhood and be a very visual part of the neighborhood. We can call it mission, but whatever you want to call it, it's being part of the community and working to help the community to something better. All the time I'm thinking that the black community, the black churches giving leadership to the black community over the years, should not lose that influence.

Whatever the point of reference, people working within and outside of the church have high expectations for what it should be doing in the community. From here, disagreements quickly arise as it becomes apparent that most of the community leaders do not believe the church is sufficiently carrying this change agent mantle within their communities. Rashad Morris, who works for the local branch of a national organization with a long history of advocating for Civil Rights, passionately expressed the following:

> Again going back to things that amaze me, we have these churches in poor communities and the people remain poor. Poor to me is a dual state, you can be poor and not have a whole lot of money but typically that feeds into a poor state of mind… can't see beyond these constraints that I have. I think the church should not only be there… [to] give material support, which I think they should, but I think they should also be active in you know…to be specific, drug addiction counseling, tutoring programs, providing and creating jobs, providing shelter for abused women, providing counseling for molested kids. I mean literally physically real life services because we know the things that make

people poor are typically low education, bad job opportunities which increases your crime and drug use and from those things you have social issues like battery, molestation and rape. They all feed together, I think the church should be literally attacking all those problems.

Barbara Gordon, founder of a neighborhood development organization, concurs by saying, "I believe that churches have abdicated their responsibilities in the community. That is why people started to look at government in terms of handouts and anything else. I truly feel that churches should really provide the human services needs in the community and then that way it could be holistic."

How well the church is doing in fulfilling its perceived role within the community is debatable. What is not as debatable is the belief held by most community entities that for the African American community to resolve the many issues it faces, the church must be involved. Sharon Knight, director of an education non-profit, stated, "[W]hen you have so much suffering, you can't expect suffering to leave a community without the church having some type of participation."

Misalignment of Expectations

While there is agreement between church and community leaders that the church has an important role to play in addressing community needs, there is no agreement for how the church should achieve this. As the discussion below demonstrates, churches provide a variety of community services. Thus the tension between church leaders' expectations and churches' actions is not primarily an issue of quantity of outreach activities, but rather an issue of the nature and depths of these activities. This lack of agreement over the kinds of outreach activities that churches engage in, and the communities they serve, creates a misalignment in expectations

that undermines the ability of church and community leaders to work together to solve pressing community issues.

Although many community leaders prefer a cooperative, outwardly-oriented church, focused on the local community and systemic change, they accuse most churches of adopting a more inwardly-focused, insulated model, focusing on problems at the individual level. The following examines the divergent expectations of the church and its relationship with the surrounding community.

Serve the Local Community

An issue that rose frequently in interviews with community leaders was the question of who the church should serve. The community leaders stated that the church had some obligation to serve members of the community in which they were physically located, the local community. Repeated references were made to the fact that many ministers and congregants only drove in from other areas of the city to their church neighborhoods on Sundays and Wednesdays, the rest of the week having no contact with the local community. Maria Simpson owns a consulting firm that collects data on the neighborhood in which a church is located and advises churches on ways to meet their local community's needs. Ms. Simpson articulated the reasons she felt such a service is needed:

> I think that...if you, I go back to if you believe that you're called to a community of God, that's what you say, then I believe you have to become more sensitive to what's actually happening with the local community. Behind the dialogues, because we can talk all day, let's start putting some action plans. Let's start seeing some outcomes. Let's start building some strategies that take our communities back, and develop ways that the church, if it's positioned in a particular community, empowers that radius around it.

Ms. Simpson went on to express the following:

…I think in some ways it's a detriment to the community… [L]iterally, we go to church and we have service, and we go back to our separate communities, wherever they are. And my question, even to my own pastor was, "Can you or anyone in your staff, any of our members tell me what happened a week ago, two weeks ago, twelve months ago in this community? And, for the most part, they don't know. There's very few people that are really connected to the community issues.

As is implied in the comment above, what is driving this concern about churches' lack of local connection is a belief that this trend is undermining the church's ability to respond to community needs. Many congregants do not live near the church they attend and therefore lack the knowledge or concern to effectively respond to local community issues. According to Dante Peters, several weeks prior to our interview, a man was attacked in broad daylight by two other men "directly across the street from a church." The beating occurred in front of a store across from a bus stop where people were exiting and boarding the bus. No one intervened; no one called the police to stop the attack. Apparently, someone posted the incident online and a third party eventually contacted the authorities. There were debates about whether the man was attacked due to his sexual orientation or whether this was a dispute between acquaintances. Either way, according to Mr. Peters, the church seemed reluctant to publicly speak out against the attack or organize a community response. I asked Mr. Peters if he thought the man's sexual orientation was a factor in the local churches' silence on the matter:

I'm not sure. I'm not sure what the issue was. The issue was that it went on three days before I even decided to do a rally because I was waiting for our faith leaders to step up and say stop the violence… I think it happened because of a couple reasons. The pastor doesn't live here, and I really do like the pastor at that church, and most of his congregation doesn't live here anymore. It's this sense of disconnect. What happens there Monday through Saturday, we're going to leave it over there. On Sunday we're going to drive in and do what we need to do.

After I raised the awareness, they were like, "You can use the church, da, da, da."

We did a bunch of rallies but there was never the faith institution stepping up and saying, "We want to lead it."… I really think that what has to happen is that churches really have to do this internal audit and really think about what is the mission and the vision of the church. What is it? What's its responsibility back to the place and where the church is, the community that's there? And how does the congregation play an active role in it?

Barbara Gordon expressed a similar concern that local churches' disconnect from the physical area in which they reside presents problems when non-profits and government agencies attempt to reach out to churches to address community problems. Her community-based non-profit, in league with other organizations, was attempting to establish a community network to protect children in a particular neighborhood. After an assessment was done, it was determined that there were more than 18 churches in this small neighborhood, but, according to Ms. Gordon, "…[M]ost of the churches were commuter churches, meaning people only came into the community on Sundays, or maybe one night during the week if they were having Bible Study. There might have been one church that had some community outreach."

Barbara Gordon recounted another incident involving a local church's youth group that is very telling about who many churches are serving. Youth programs are often an easy channel to draw local youth into the church. If any ministry of a church has a local emphasis, one would expect it to be the youth group. For the churches in Ms. Gordon's community, that was not the case:

…[W]e have a church that is directly across the street that I have been persistent, in terms of reaching out to them, about connecting with us, in terms of their accessibility, in terms of space, asking them if they can provide some space. Again, it's a commuter church. Most of the members come from outside of the community… I went to a service at the church recently, and I took one of the residents that live across the street in the apartment complex where we're working, and asked her if she could identify any of the youth that were in their youth group. This woman is very active in the community and because she has children herself, they're very active in the Parks and Rec department which is right

down the street, so she knows most of the youth in the community. That's why I'm making this point. She did not recognize any of those youth as being from the Terrance Road community...so even the kids were commuting in. The outreach that this church was providing was for their own church members. They don't live in the community.

The community leaders are fighting against a common trend within the metropolis. One interviewee stated that you have to drive at least 25 minutes to get anywhere in Jefferson. People commute long distances to get to work, to go shopping, and perhaps even to go to school. The religious field is no exception. In large metro areas, many upwardly mobile African Americans, are moving toward the suburbs (Cnaan et al. 2006, 8). More land, larger homes, and often better amenities often come at the price of moving miles away from childhood neighborhoods. Maria Simpson comments on this trend:

> In my community, I think there's a shift that's happening just because … the role of the church has changed from like the 1950s and 60s to now in the sense that we moved from being a localized entity within a community that dealt very in-depth in community issues. Especially in Jefferson, we have what's called "commuter churches," and so I would say 85% of the people who go to church in Jefferson, we commute from other communities. And my church is one of them.

This disconnect with a local community is reinforced by the increasing presence of mega-churches. The churches participating in my study attract weekly Sunday attendances ranging from 4,000 to 8,000 people. In addition to worship services, most of the churches have their own schools and recreational centers. An increasing trend among large churches is to have your own coffee shop and bookstore, although only one of the churches in my study had one. Maintaining operations this large requires an extensive staff and meeting spaces, in addition to an abundance of parking. Organizations with these facility demands require land, a lot of it. The increasing drive to expand is pushing more churches to less densely populated areas. Many mega-churches

are located in areas not because they have a historic connection to the location, but rather because the location meets their logistic needs.

Almost none of the church leaders interviewed expressed concern about not directing their services at the local community. There were references made to their churches being representative of their county. Most of the outreach partnerships mentioned were with metro-wide non-profits. All of the monthly or bi-monthly missionary or evangelical outings traversed the city, not just their local area. When asked what they did in the community, several people mentioned programs that anyone could take part in, but nothing limited to the local area. They could be attracting people from down the road or from a neighboring town. No one indicated that this was problematic. I asked leaders what were the most important ministries of their particular church? One minister responded, "I believe that missions is a critical piece that we have, where we're reaching out to people in different places, whether it's our local missions or one across the country, or even in another country." The local ministry was not given more importance than any other level of ministry. All the churches that participated in my study had expansive views of who and where they were called to serve. Similar to R. Drew Smith's (2001) findings in Indianapolis, for these churches, community was not bound by a geographic area and they did not view themselves as local churches serving the local community.

Indeed, these churches resemble what Ammerman (2001, 130-31) calls "niche congregations":

> [N]iche congregations do not serve a specific locale. They reach beyond an immediate neighborhood to create an identity relatively independent of context. While many forces still bind congregation and community to each other, making parish-style congregations a recognizable part of the religious landscape, there are also strong forces creating a larger urban religious ecology with many choices not tied to residential neighborhood. The implications of a mobile, cosmopolitan culture, where congregational choice is the norm,

make such specialized religious sorting more and more likely.

A traditional, neighborhood-based church model that many of the community leaders clamored for does not reflect the four participating churches' outreach ministries, membership pool, or mobilization efforts. When I asked the church leaders whether there was a local issue around which the church mobilized, the only issues that were mentioned were Katrina and Trayvon Martin. Terrance Davis, a youth pastor, stated the following:

> **Davis**: I think when we have issues that are close to home we do respond to those issues. We are not necessarily a politically-affiliated church though. We're not really political in a lot of things we do. I can tell you two major issues. I guess these are not necessarily local but made it on the list. With Katrina in '05 we secured several apartments in the adjacent complex for those who came from Katrina and provided a lot for them. With the Trayvon Martin case as well, I think that had national press.
> **Interviewer**: The church got involved how...
> **Davis**: The church got involved through like hoodie rallies. We took up Skittles and sent them to the police department of the region where it took place. I can't think of anything local, but if something local was to take place I think we'd be involved, yeah.

Though Minister Davis seemed confident that the church would mobilize around a pressing community issue, neither he nor anyone else I spoke to in the church could recall a local incident in which the church got involved. This was the same in the other participating churches. The only mobilizing events that arose in the interviews were Katrina and Trayvon Martin. Local events do not appear to be on their radar. The churches' reluctance to speak out or organize protest activities on local issues, however, is consistent with the behavior of African American churches nationally. Michael L. Owens (2007, 198) revealed that many church leaders and African Americans in general decreasingly found protest as an effective means to bring attention to issues within the community. In addition, churches increasingly fear the loss of their tax exempt status due to engaging in prohibited political activities, though Owens noted that church

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leaders often overestimated the expansiveness of these prohibitions.

Collaboration Deficit

A contentious issue for religious institutions deals with their ability to collaborate with others. Some scholars claim that churches are isolated and unaware of what other organizations are doing, while others refute this position, providing evidence that collaboration among religious and secular organizations is commonplace among churches (Farnsley 2003; Cnaan 2006, 96). The community leaders in this study do not support the collaboration thesis. A common complaint mentioned by interviewees was that church leaders did not listen. Instead of listening to the advice of community organizers who often had more expertise in the area, many church leaders would tell them what the problems were and how best to solve them. For example, in one community the churches went to an area non-profit asking for funds to start a food kitchen. The organization said they could not directly provide them funds, but they could help them obtain food from a local food bank. The leader of the organization thought that this was a more sustainable model for the program. The churches disagreed. Sometime later, as predicted, the churches ran out of money and again asked the non-profit for funds. The organization explained that they could not directly give funds to a religious institution, but suggested they use one offering a month to support the food program. The church leaders immediately refused, stating that they could not afford to give up a week of offerings. The leader of this non-profit repeatedly tried to help the churches create a sustainable food distribution system without success. The churches came to the non-profit, not looking to collaborate on a program, but with a set idea of what they wanted to do and what was the best way to do it. They demanded resources, they did not seek partnership. During my interviews I heard several other stories of church leaders entering potentially collaborative situations unwilling to listen to other

ideas.

Another critique within this same vein leveled by community leaders toward churches is the tendency of churches to act as competitors to other community organizations, not collaborators. Instead of focusing on the areas in which they may hold an advantage, many churches want to be, as one community leader put it, "the all in all." Many churches may behave this way because, as explained above, that was the role the church played in the past. It is also possible churches are mirroring the models they increasingly see in today's mega-churches. The problem with this model is that most churches do not have the capacity that mega-churches possess. Dante Peters, the head of a community development organization, believes a church model based on actors focusing on their own strengths best serves the community:

> We can be definitely helping the same family in a wrap-around of services where the church is meeting more of the social needs and we're meeting more of the civic and economic needs. I think that's a better mix. But when I have to compete with a church for housing development in the same neighborhood that we're in or I have to compete with a church around social service programs, it does a disservice to the neighborhood.

The type of model advocated by Mr. Peters would require relatively extensive engagement and coordination with other community actors, which would go against another characteristic many community leaders found increasingly common in area churches. The phrase "insular" was often banded about in my interviews. In line with the trend to be church members' "all in all," many observers see some churches as isolating themselves from the rest of the community. Diane Ford, administrator of an ecumenical organization, stated, "There are some churches that I really worry about the fact that they don't need anybody else." To Ms. Ford, being a church implies working collectively within "the body of Christ" to work on issues. Many churches seem content to "stand in the gap" alone.

My time visiting churches and interviewing church leaders does, in part, give credence to this concern. I saw very little evidence, in fact no evidence, of activities with other churches, the exception being within youth programs. Outside ministers did participate in church services on occasion, but these were often ministers with a national presence who traveled from outside the state. I write "in part," however, because the churches did on occasion allow outside entities to use their facilities. They also frequently provided volunteers to area wide non-profits, but these were all short-term, low commitment activities, not the extensive engagement for which many community leaders advocate.

There are many reasons that may account for what I call a "collaboration deficit" amongst many churches and between the churches and area non-profits, the first being tradition. Historically, the African American church has been the primary if not sole African American controlled organization within African American communities. There was a time when the church probably was the most knowledgeable about the needs of its community, in large part because most members of the community were congregants. The church's central role within the community logically meant that the pastors of said churches were also central figures. African American pastors have long been highly respected and powerful figures, not just as spiritual leaders, but often as political leaders as well. Traditionally more educated and well-spoken than those around them, they wielded an enormous amount of power and influence, to the chagrin of some observers. E. Franklin Frazier was noted for his contempt of ministers, blaming them for what he saw as the "backwardness" of African Americans (Frazier 1974). From slavery through the Civil Rights Movement, many ministers actively counseled their congregants to avoid resistance, ranging from telling them that obeying their masters was God's will to discouraging them from participating in the activities surrounding the Movement. Calling them "petty

tyrants", Frazier argued that ministers used their power not to effect change within their communities, but rather to punish and reward based on personal loyalty and enrich themselves off the backs of their poor congregants (90). This authoritarian style of leadership filtered into the other social and business enterprises that would eventually be spawned from the church. Frazier claimed that African Americans were not prepared for the democratic process because of this authoritarian environment (1974, 90). There is work that counters Frazier's claim, arguing that the church has been an environment where African Americans could hone important civic skills (Brown and Brown 2003). The truth is probably a mix of both positions, but it is safe to say that ministers were influential figures within their communities.

Times have changed and the church is no longer the hegemonic power base it once was, but pastors still tend to be highly influential figures within their congregations and communities, particularly the leaders of today's mega-churches whose charismatic personalities are typically responsible for their churches' enormous growth. In the era of mega-churches, they often possess unmatched capacity to mobilize and reach the masses. This influence is compounded by the emergence of Christian multi-media. Christian scholars have often written books and a few appeared on television in the past, but today's top televangelists have global empires. TD Jakes, founder of the Potter's House in Dallas, TX, not only has a congregation topping 30,000 members, but is seen on television by millions of viewers. He has written numerous best-sellers and produced more than five films. This is in addition to his conferences and speaking engagements throughout the world.

The head pastors of the churches in my study do not have the reach of TD Jakes, but their influence is still considerable. In addition to the thousands of congregants that fill their pews every Sunday, their church services and Bible Studies are transmitted via the web. One church

leader remarked that over 20,000 people watched church service through their web page every Sunday. Few of the community leaders with whom I spoke can match the level of influence of these pastors; therefore, it is not hard to understand why some church leaders believe that they have an inside track on understanding the needs of the community at large. Yet influence does not always equate to knowledge and expertise. Most of the community leaders I interviewed possessed at least a master's degree. They have spent years dedicated to specific areas such as education, the social welfare system, or finance. Though much of the church staff is also well educated, most do not have expertise in areas specifically related to community development, nor do they have the time to specifically focus on such issues as they were hired to run ministries within a church.

One of my interviewees thought this collaboration deficit boiled down to training. Ministers are trained to deal with congregations, they are trained to deal with staff, and they are trained to lead. They often are not trained to collaborate. Dante Peters, senior executive of a large foundation, offers the following solution:

> …I think that we've got to give greater attention to preparation and leadership for African American clergy and faith leaders. I think that…being here in the home of one of the largest schools that prepare folks, I suspect that, while there are attempts to kind of change and bring it into kind of a new era and current, that it's not happening nearly enough, so there, there's not enough early exposure and understanding of community, of the changes, that are going on in community, of the ability to connect with … the non-profit sector, with community and civic groups. I think the focus is still on building a strong church, you know, sending a good, a strong message, but really knowing how not to just go visit the sick and hungry but if the issue is HIV/AIDS not being scared and understanding what that means, I don't think that's keeping up, and I think it needs to be.

Whether or not it does exist and whatever the reason for its existence, community leaders' belief in a cooperation deficit poses a serious impediment to effectively mobilizing

resources to combat community problems. At the least it shows that many important community actors are dissatisfied with their working relationship with religious institutions.

Different Organizations, Different Logics

Another important factor contributes to the "collaboration deficit" between churches and community-based organizations. During my time with community leaders I realized that many of them did not fully appreciate the fact that churches are not your typical non-profit organizations. They may do many of the same activities that a non-profit would, but they ultimately have different roles and priorities. Jeavons (2000, 18 as cited in Cnaan 2006, 1) writes that religious institutions' core functions are worship, religious education, and organizational maintenance. The findings from this study support that assessment.

Almost all the church leaders in the study cited bringing people to Christ as their primary objective. They may participate in similar activities as traditional non-profits, but their ultimate aim is evangelism. In this study, most churches use activities and services as a means to draw people to Christ, which seemingly contradicts the findings of Ram Cnaan (2006, 285) in his study of churches in Philadelphia where he claimed most of the churches in his study did not offer social service provisions in order to evangelize. Diane Winters, an associate pastor, explains, "If you go on missions, the idea is you are going to be meeting some needs. It might be hunger. It might be clothing. It might be medical. In the same frame you are going to provide an opportunity to share who Christ is." She later expressed this idea in even more detail:

> We have a social ministry, first of all, that is dedicated to reaching out to different people
> wherever they are, whatever their needs happen to be. We also have our recreation
> ministry. We try to get to know our community through providing those kinds of
> opportunities. I'll just tell you, I came to St. Paul because my children joined the sports
> ministry…That's a great conduit for us to have an opportunity to reach out in a different

way, but all of it coming right back to try to share Christ with the world. We have opportunities in even something like golfing. We teach them to golf and in the context of their golfing, there's conversation happening. Bowling. There's conversation happening. We have quite a lot of conduits where we get to know people. We share with them, and we use that knowledge. You could say it is a ploy of a sort. It's our way of saying, "We want to be involved with every aspect of people's lives." That's what we do.

Byron Jackson, a deacon at another church, expressed a similar idea about offering church benefits as a way to draw people in:

> …I think the ultimate purpose would be to attract people to come, for whatever needs they have, by offering them something that ultimately attracts them to salvation…I think if we are working more on taking care of the people in the Church, their physical needs, their economic needs, then you attract people to come to the Church, where essentially what you'll wind up with is a congregation or community of people that benefits from the resources they all have.

This focus on bringing people into the church, known as church growth, requires churches to expend resources in areas that attract and maintain church attendance – constructing nice buildings, maintaining recreational spaces, offering youth programs, hosting funerals, and numerous other resource consuming activities.

Traditional non-profits can focus most of their resources on resolving community problems. Most churches cannot, although the amount of resources churches focus on their members is and has been a point of contention. All four churches in my study are extremely large, with two out of the four having their own primary and/or secondary schools to run as well. In addition to the paid staff that run the various ministries, these churches also need additional staff to maintain their respective campuses. Giving the people what they want requires money, a lot of it. A large percentage of church revenue goes to maintaining these substantial infrastructures in addition to widespread ministerial obligations. Not everyone in the community

approves of how many of these churches distribute their funds. Rashad Morris, an administrator with a national civil rights advocacy organization, is one of the critics:

> What the church has become is what I like to call a "spending house." People bring their tithes and offering in the church and they spend it. The church is not storing it. So the church has been a place where there is a tremendous amount of benevolent energy and a tremendous amount of benevolent resources brought to this entity–it spends it on itself. So we have a lot of buildings, a lot of payroll, a lot of pastor assistants, a lot of pastors with no jobs. We have a lot of a lot. But what is not is a lot of people actively working. You have these churches with $3 million dollar budgets and they, heaven forbid they give $25,000 bucks of that back out…

The debate over how churches distribute their funds has lasted centuries and is unlikely to end any time soon. The intense focus on church funds should not overshadow the fact the many churches are dependent on volunteer resources to function. Expectations are high for churches, especially mega-churches, to fulfill many roles, yet they often lack consistent resources to meet these expectations. Despite extensive paid staff, they still rely on their members to donate their time and resources to sustain their ministries. Some of my interviewees expressed concern about the dearth of people that actually participate in church activities. Chris Michaels, a leader in his church's men's ministry, states, "Today you have what they call the mega-church. The mega-church is filled with a lot of people. It's a mile wide but an inch deep." Mega-churches are dependent upon that inch. The more people in a church, the easier it is for members to blend into the masses, their lack of contribution to church ministries and activities being hard to detect. Unlike most of the community leaders I interviewed, participating in ministries is not many church leaders' full time job. Churches find themselves in a Catch-22. The overhead and salaries that critics complain about are to some degree necessary to build the large membership bases that provide churches the institutional capacity community organizations want to leverage.

Draw Them In

Another reason that churches are not like traditional non-profits is their emphasis on serving those within the walls of the church. As stated earlier, none of the churches in the study had any type of ministry outside of their own buildings, but some church leaders argued that their primary biblical responsibility was to those within their own congregation. Below is an exchange that occurred during the interview of a youth pastor, Terrance Davis, after I asked him what the church's role should be in dealing specifically with the poor:

> **Davis**: The church's role in helping the poor is to provide for their needs… the poor. I think based upon God's word, the church is responsible for taking care of its own, primarily those within the flock, within the fold who are experiencing some sort of economic hardship or poverty, all their needs should be met within the church, or at least to some extent…. I think in the sense that, if the church does not help the impoverished outside of its fold, I don't think the church is failed, but I do think the church can do well from a public relations standpoint, from a community perspective or image standpoint too, to be visible to those in need.
> **Interviewer**: But the moral responsibility or the biblical responsibility is for...
> **Davis**: I think the biblical responsibility is for those in the flock first, the moral responsibility does include any and all.

Though not everyone would explicitly state that the church has a greater obligation to those within the church than without, this logic can be inferred in what many deemed their community outreach programs. Many interviewees seemed proud that their church offered services that were open to anyone in the community, member or not. Most of these services, however, required the community to enter the church. Whether it was tutoring programs, recreational activities, home buying classes, paying bills, or providing food, they were all done within the confines of the church. When many church leaders think of helping the community, they envision drawing people in and providing them support. With this fact in mind, the

collaboration deficit does make more sense to some degree. Community leaders criticized churches for participating in once- or twice-a-month outreach activities, claiming communities needed more extensive engagement to see any real change. The churches do provide extensive engagement in a sense. They are extensively engaged with community members that are willing to continuously enter their doors.

Change the System vs. Adapt to the System

Earlier in the paper there is a quote by Diane Ford that expresses her concern that "some churches don't need anyone." She went on to qualify that statement in the exchange presented below:

> **Ford**: Yeah. Of course, many of them do run, I'm sure, food pantries, they do missions to Haiti, they send people. I believe, to be effective across the community, what you do and give should be about justice, not charity, but that's my personal opinion.
> **Interviewer**: When you say that, you mean transforming the system, not just meeting an immediate need like a stop gap?
> **Ford**: It could be. There's a place for both, but there needs to be an awareness that the system is broken.
> **Interviewer:** What role do you think churches should play in the community?
> **Ford**: As both dispensers of charity and advocates for system change.

Another community leader, Nancy Lismore, showed similar concern for what she thought were churches' focus on addressing short-term needs versus long-term transformations. I asked her what she believed was the church's role in specifically helping the poor. She responded as follows:

> [W]ell, I think that, I actually think that's one of the best things they do. Now I don't know if they… help them long term, but I think that the church, and particularly African American church, … is about – take care of the poor, take care of the needy, and so I think that generally [they are] pretty darn good about that. But I think it's probably more

just filling an immediate gap. What they could do is more deliberately connect to these nonprofits and agencies that have the systems and the expertise to help to move a person from being hungry today to being employed, self-sufficient and employed, you know, at some point in time. Churches don't look that far, but they will give you a meal.

Nancy Lismore's position is supported by the literature. African American churches are very active in providing social services to marginalized groups, particularly the poor. Their effectiveness in producing systemic economic change is less evident (Owens 2007). This desire for long-term transformation of communities emerged throughout my interviews with community leaders. They expressed frustration with short-term church interventions such as monthly help with the homeless efforts, desiring extensive engagement that altered the community. They wanted churches to focus on systemic change that transformed not only the people, but the situation they were in. On the surface, it appeared that many church leaders were advocating for the same thing. Helen Winters, an associate pastor, seemed to express a similar philosophy:

I think—I don't think I actually know— that part of our goal is to reach out to the poor and to the needy to provide the support we can, and not to a fault, but quite often we provide food or things like that. The idea is also to be in that whole loop of helping them get jobs, and helping them be able to fend for themselves at some point. It's like giving them fish, but also teaching them to fish.

Church and community leaders have high expectations for the church's ability to transform their communities – economically and socially. Most of the church leaders believed their churches were doing their part. If people came asking for financial help, churches would require the person to participate in a budgeting course. If someone is going through some type of crisis, they offer counseling to help get them through the tough times. The churches provided space for members' to advertise their businesses. All of the churches prioritized education, either

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forming their own schools or hosting community-wide tutoring programs. Information about job

openings and job fairs were routinely announced. Money management and investment seminars

were offered to the community.

The churches in my study offered programs to help individuals overcome personal

obstacles and succeed in the current economic environment. This strategy focuses on helping

communities one individual at a time. These churches are not so much challenging the system, as

they are preparing people to succeed within the system. This is not the system change for which

Diane Ford and other community leaders advocate. I make no claims about which approach is

right or wrong, but it is important to recognize that they are different. An organization focusing

on systemic change may not approach a problem or advocate the same solutions as an

organization that focuses on changing the individual or that sees the individual as the source of

the problem.

Summary

The churches alluded to by the community leaders, and even more so the churches that

directly participated in this study, can hardly be placed in the traditional category of "other-

worldly." The term "other-worldly" refers to churches that ignore earthly concerns, instead

focusing on evangelism and the afterlife. All of the churches I observed prioritized evangelism,

but they also appeared very intent on serving "their community" in some way. This is not,

however, always "the community" that community leaders would prefer. In practice, these

churches saw "their community" as including those people that came to use their services or the

broader metro area, not necessarily the area that surrounds their edifices, as many community

leaders envision religious institutions doing.

Without a doubt, the churches involved in this study offered numerous services to the metro area. They offered educational services, youth programs, art and music ministries, counseling services, prison ministries, funeral services, and financial management classes. The churches provided volunteers for metro-wide non-profits, gave money to those facing immediate financial needs, fed the hungry, and provided a space for certain electoral activities. The misalignment of expectations concerning the church's role in the community, therefore, is not a quantitative issue, but rather a qualitative issue. Community leaders and church leaders disagree on how the church should be involved in the community. Community leaders desire churches to be localized entities that engage in extensive, outwardly-focused ministries, addressing problems in local geographic contexts while thinking at a systemic level. The church leaders do not feel bound to serve a local area, preferring independent, inwardly-focused ministries designed to address problems at the individual level. I cannot say what differences in outcomes the leaders' differing models produced in the community, but they did lead to different types of community interaction.

Implications of a Changing Church

If community leaders are unhappy with the church now, the future is probably not going to improve. The things they most despise are only magnifying due to three influential trends sweeping religious America – the Prosperity Gospel, mega-churches, and neo-liberalism. The Prosperity Gospel is a relatively new, yet widely popular theology that emphasizes God's desire for his people to prosper. A lack of prosperity, so the doctrine goes, may indicate an individual is not following the will of God. The growing presence of mega-churches is increasing the number of large-scale religious institutions that have the capacity to act in an insular, "all in all" fashion.

Even though only a small percentage of US churches are mega-churches, their success is influencing the organizational and programmatic orientation of much smaller churches. Thumma and Travis (2007) refer to smaller churches that mimic the ways of mega-churches as "mini-megas." Finally, market forces have infiltrated most areas of US society, and we can increasingly see their presence in the church. These larger churches are increasingly more professionalized, revenue generating, and intent on improving their members' ability to thrive in the economic market. They often do this through investment and budgeting classes or courses on home ownership. These three streams influencing the religious environment are not acting in isolation. Each trend aids in fostering a mutually reinforcing environment that strengthens the others. These trends in conjunction with each other work to increase the distance between the actions of the church and the expectations of area non-profits.

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