SUPPORTING BLACK CHURCHES

Faith, Outreach, and the Inner-City Poor

BY JOHN J. DIIULIO, JR.

BLACK AMERICANS are in many ways the most religious people in America. Some 82 percent of blacks (versus 67 percent of whites) are church members; 82 percent of blacks (versus 55 percent of whites) say that religion is "very important in their life." Eighty-six percent of blacks (versus 60 percent of whites) believe that religion "can answer all or most of today's problems."

Lloyd Wolf

And the religious faith of black Americans issues today, as it has for more than a century, in active work in the community. In his 1899 classic, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, W. E. B. Du Bois observed, "Without wholly conscious effort the Negro church has become a centre of social intercourse to a degree unknown in white churches.... Consequently all movements for social betterment are apt to centre in the churches." Almost 100 years later, in their 1990 *The Black Church in the African-American Experience*, Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya made a similar finding. In their surveys encompassing nearly 1,900 black ministers and more than 2,100 black churches, some 71 percent of black clergy reported that their churches engaged in community outreach programs. Urban churches, Lincoln and Mamiya found, were generally more engaged in outreach than rural ones. From their comprehensive survey, the authors concluded, "We suspect that black churches, on the whole, are more socially active in their communities than white churches and that they also tend to participate in a greater range of community programs."

In my view, the most vital work of these active black churches is that done on the streets in America's inner cities. Day by day, clergy, volunteers, and people of faith monitor, mentor, and minister to the daily needs of the inner-city black children, who, through absolutely no fault of their own, live in neighborhoods where opportunities are few and drugs, crime, and failed public schools are common. There, faith-driven community activists strive against the odds to help these children—from innocent toddlers, to pregnant teenagers, to young men on probation—avoid violence, achieve literacy, gain jobs, and otherwise reach adulthood physically, educationally, and economically whole.

John J. Dilulio, Jr., former director of the Brookings Center for Public Management, is a nonresident senior fellow in the Brookings Governmental Studies program and professor of politics at Princeton University.

Is Religion the Answer?

Is there any social scientific evidence to show that religious do-gooding does any good or to justify the faith of most black Americans that religion can "answer all or most of today's problems"?

Over the past several years, journalists have begun to take a keen interest in that question. In September 1996, the cover of *U.S. News and World Report* asked, "Can Churches Cure America's Ills?" and the stories answered largely in the affirmative. A June 1998 *Newsweek* cover story on the inner-city ministry of Boston's Rev. Eugene F. Rivers, III, had been preceded by articles on Rivers's work by Joe Klein in the *New Yorker*, George Will in the *Washington Post*, and Bob Herbert in the *New York Times*. Another 1998 feature, this one in *Time* magazine, heralded Brother Bill, a Catholic lay worker who "repeatedly walks into gunfire to stop the shooting—and love the unloved."

While such "faith factor" journalism is out ahead of the empirical research on religion and social action, it is hardly pure hype. As UCLA's James Q. Wilson has succinctly summarized the small but not insignificant body of credible evidence to date, "Religion, independent of social class, reduces deviance." When criminologist Byron Johnson and medical research scientist David Larson reviewed some 400 juvenile delinquency studies published between 1980 and 1997, they found that the more scientific the study, the more optimistic its findings are about the extent to which "religion reduces deviance." A 1995 article in the journal *Criminology* by David Evans found that religion, "as indicated by religious activities, had direct personal effects on adult criminality as measured by a broad range of criminal acts."

In relation to black inner-city poverty and related social ills, perhaps the single most illustrative line of "religion reduces deviance" research begins with a 1985 study by Harvard economist Richard Freeman, runs through the work of Larson, and continues through the community development, mentoring, and faith factor research of analysts at Public/Private Ventures, a Philadelphia-based national nonprofit youth policy research organization.

In 1985 Freeman reported that church-going, independent of other factors, made young black males from high-poverty neighborhoods substantially more likely to "escape" poverty, crime, and other social ills. In a reanalysis and extension of Freeman's work published by the Manhattan Institute, Larson and Johnson mine national time-series data on urban black youth and find that, using a more multidimensional measure of religious commitment than church-going, religion is indeed a powerful predictor of escaping poverty, crime, and other social ills, more powerful even than such variables as peer influences. Like Freeman, Larson and

Johnson conjecture that the potential of church-going and other religious influences to improve the life prospects of poor black urban youth is in part a function of how church-going and other faith factors influence how young people spend their time, the extent of their engagement in positive structured activities, and the degree to which they are supported by responsible adults.

This conjecture is borne out in part by a 1998 P/PV analysis, based on original survey and field research, of how predominantly minority low-income urban youth spend their time in the "moderately poor" neighborhoods of Austin, Texas; Savannah, Georgia; and St. Petersburg, Florida. First, the bad news. Researchers Cynthia L. Sipe and Patricia Ma found that a majority of children in three groups—aged 12 to 14, 15 to 17, and 18 to 20—in each neighborhood in each city spent most of their after-school time just "hanging out." Overall, "a disturbingly high share" (from 15 percent to 25 percent) were "not engaged in any positive structured activities," had "no or very few adults in their lives," and were "not working." There is every reason to suppose that the unsupported fraction runs even higher in the poorest inner-city neighborhoods.

Now, however, the good news. Across all age groups and cities, most youth who did receive adult support and guidance (whether at home, in school, or in community organizations) and did participate in positive structured activities were significantly more likely than their "disconnected" peers to succeed. Finally, the good news about religion. The P/PV study had expected to find that public schools and programs like Boys Clubs and Girls Clubs, Police Athletic League, Ys, and Big Brothers Big Sisters provided substantial support for children in these communities. Those expectations were not entirely disappointed. But what the study also revealed was that churches and faith-based programs played a major "support for youth" role in providing after-school "safe havens," recreation, mentoring, child care, meals, and more. In the Savannah study site, for example, 52 churches dwarfed schools both in sheer numbers and in terms of outreach programs and activities for neighborhood youth, 97 percent of them black.

The unavoidable conclusion, notes P/PV's Gary Walker, a 25-year veteran of the field, is that "Most private, nonprofit mentoring programs, like most social policy–driven youth development programs, simply don't reach or support the most severely at-risk inner-city youth." Where secular mentoring and conventional social services programs for poor urban youth typically end, churches and religious outreach ministries often begin.

Black Church Outreach

The black church's uniquely powerful community outreach tradition is grounded in eight major historically black Christian churches: African Methodist Episcopal; African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Christian Methodist Episcopal, Church of God in Christ, National Baptist Convention of America, National Baptist Convention USA, National Missionary Baptist Convention, and the Progressive National Baptist Convention. In addition to the 65,000 churches and 20 million members of the eight denominations, scores of independent or quasi-independent black churches or church networks and at least nine certified religious training programs operated by accredited seminaries are also directed toward ministry in black churches and black faith communities.

Unfortunately, until recently, that outreach tradition and what it portends for social action against inner-city ills has been largely ignored by a strange bedfellows assortment of academics and intellectual elites.

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

For example, James Blackwell's 1975 book *The Black Community*, considered by Billingsley and several other experts to be "the best study" of its kind since Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro*, devoted not a single chapter to the black church, and Billingsley's own 1968 *Black Families in White America*, written as a rebuttal to the 1965 Moynihan Report on the breakdown of the American black family, "devoted less than two pages to discussing the relevance of the black church as a support system for African-American families." Billingsley speculates that black intellectuals ignored black churches in part out of a false fidelity to the canons of objective scholarship.

It is perhaps easier to explain why secular white intellectuals on both the left and the right have often overlooked black churches. Sheer ignorance is one factor. Ideology is another. On the secular left, black churches have been made synonymous with the civil rights movement of the 1960s. They are valued mainly for supporting successive liberal causes that favor big government, not for supporting local social action, and least of all for action led by people who, whatever their politics, can often be heard to take the divinity of Jesus Christ as seriously as they take the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

In essence, for secular liberals to take full heed of the black church outreach tradition would be for them not only to "do God," but to kneel before the principle of subsidiarity, a principle rooted firmly in Christian social thought and well-defined by Harvard's Mary Ann Glendon as "the notion that no social task should be allocated to a body larger than the smallest one that can effectively do the job." That is something many secular liberals, including liberal civil libertarians who fear that any real engagement with churches or church-state cooperation will unduly advantage religion and promote "intolerance" in the public square, will never do.

Until recently, many on the right stereotyped black churches and community-serving religious organizations gen-

erally (Salvation Army, Catholic Charities) as political props of big-government liberalism. But even conservatives who do not see black urban ministers simply as agents of liberal policy agendas have misunderstood black churches. For example, in a 1997 book purporting to speak for "the bold new voice of black conservatives in America," it is asserted that while black Americans "hold mainstream social norms, and their leaders know the ravages that drugs, crime and dependency have meant for black areas," black "community leaders and clergymen seldom speak up publicly for enforcing mores."

The truth, however, is that many or most do indeed "speak publicly" on family responsibility and related matters. Until recently, however, they have rarely been heard. Countless black church leaders I have met, heard, and studied over the past several years may or may not hold conventionally conservative political views on "enforcing mores," but they are, if anything, more vocal, more committed, and more consistent about promoting and enforcing personal, family, and community responsibility than many conservatives I know, white and black.

In his chapter of that book, Reverend Jesse Peterson, a grassroots community activist in Los Angeles who assists young black men, confronts an issue that I have heard raised and debated among inner-city black church leaders, namely, how the politicization of some black urban churches and the empire-building of some clergymen have "had a corrupting influence" on the black church outreach tradition: "While urban black churches are literally falling apart, ministers are striving to build bigger churches and to maximize the membership of their churches. But Jesus came to give life, not fame and money. We have an out-of-wedlock pregnancy rate of nearly 70 percent…random violence terrorizes black neighborhoods; husbands walk out on their wives and families; and drugs are openly sold on the streets. With black churches on almost every street corner in black neighborhoods, we have to begin to examine why the church is so ineffective at bringing life to black communities."

Black church leaders, young and old, are keenly aware of this dilemma, though most state it more gently. A more refined and empirically well-grounded perspective on variations in the extent of black church outreach is provided by sociologist Harold Dean Trulear, an ordained black minister who did outreach work in New Jersey, taught for eight years at the New York Theological Seminary, has conducted extensive research on black clergy training, and is now vice president for research on religion and at-risk youth at P/PV.

"When it comes to youth and community outreach in the inner city," Trulear cautions, "not all black urban churches are created equal.…Inner-city churches with high resident membership cater more to high-risk neighborhood youth than…black churches with inner-city addresses but increasingly or predominantly suburbanized or commuting congregations.…It's the small and medium-sized churches…(especially) the so-called…blessing stations and specialized youth chapels with their charismatic leader and their small, dedicated staff of adult volunteers (that)…do a disproportionate amount of the up close and personal outreach work with the worst-off inner-city youth."

When it comes to social action against urban problems and the plight of the black inner-city poor, the reality is that black churches cannot do it all (or do it alone) and that not all black churches do it. But that reality should obscure neither the black church tradition nor its many and powerful contemporary manifestations from Boston to Austin, from New York to Los Angeles.

Today a number of intellectuals and policy leaders are reclaiming the black church tradition. In a 1997 essay in these pages, Boston University's Glenn Loury and Tufts University's Linda Datcher-Loury, writing not only as economists but as blacks attached to black churches, argued persuasively that voluntary associations, "as exemplified by religious institutions," can be valuable allies in the battle against social pathology. From a less academic, more practice-driven perspective, Robert L. Woodson, Sr., president of the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise in Washington, D.C., reclaims that black church outreach tradition in his 1998 book, *The Triumphs of Joseph: How Today's Community Healers Are Reviving Our Streets and Neighborhoods*.

The Least of Us, the Rest of Us

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

Religious institutions alone cannot reasonably be expected to cure the social problems that disproportionately afflict the black inner-city poor. It remains to be seen how, if at all, the local faith-based efforts can be taken to scale in ways that predictably, reliably, and cost-effectively cut crime, reduce poverty, or yield other desirable social consequences.

But overlooking, unduly discounting, or simply failing to support the outreach efforts of black churches and other inner-city faith communities is the single biggest mistake that can be made by anyone who cares about the future of the truly disadvantaged men, women, and children of all races who call the inner cities home.

Citizens who for whatever reasons are nervous about religion or enhanced church-state partnerships should focus on the consistent finding that faith-based outreach efforts benefit poor unchurched neighborhood children most of all. If these churches are so willing to support and reach out to "the least of these," surely they deserve the human and financial support of the rest of us—corporations, foundations, other Christian churches, and, where appropriate, government agencies. ■