

# Working Papers

## **Faith-based Organizations and the Sharing of Social Responsibility: Comparing the Community Programs of African American, Interracial, and White Congregations**

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**Faith-based Organizations and the Sharing of Social Responsibility:  
Comparing the Community Programs of African American,  
Interracial, and White Congregations**

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**Abstract:** *This article explores the extent to which congregations in the United States share social responsibility through social services and community development programs. The questions addressed are: Are African American congregations more involved than their interracial and White counterparts in social and community services? Are African American congregations more involved than their interracial and White counterparts in community development?*

**Keywords:** faith-based organizations, race, in-depth interviews, cross-sectional study, social responsibility, community development

In the United States, the burden of social welfare has never rested squarely with the federal or state government. Instead, reminiscent of the Elizabethan Poor Laws of 1601, individuals, the family, and the local community have been expected to shoulder a share of the social responsibility for the poor. However, not since the New Deal era policies (i.e. the Social Security Act of 1935) has the government expected the private sector to assume a dominant role in supplying social services. The enactment of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) (P.L. 104-193) drastically changed the welfare assistance benefits, mandating personal responsibility for recipients and shifting social responsibility from the federal government to state governments and ultimately community-based organizations. Most notably it signaled a retreat from government responsibility as the federal entitlement program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) became the time-limited Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program. In addition, the federal government limited food stamp eligibility for those aged 18 to 50 without dependents, restricted welfare provision for non-citizens, and tightened the Supplemental Security Insurance (SSI) benefits for children. Section 104 of this legislation, also known as Charitable Choice, encouraged faith-based organizations to play a larger role in social service delivery by reducing barriers for “pervasively sectarian” social service providers to access public funds.

The Bush administration has called upon the “armies of compassion” to assume greater social responsibility since welfare, as we have known it in the United States, ended under the Clinton administration. To rally these armies, President Bush’s first executive order established the White House Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives. He has also appealed to Congress to pass legislation that provides incentives for charitable giving and builds the financial and technical capacity of faith-based and other community-based organizations groups serving the most vulnerable populations.

The tension arising from an approach favoring both individual responsibility of those in need and the social responsibility of citizens and community organizations begs the question: Which community-based organizations carry the burden for meeting the social responsibility for the poor? Are African American community-serving organizations shouldering a greater portion of the social responsibility? To explore these questions, this paper will examine the extent to which African American congregations in the United States are sharing social responsibility through their faith-based social services and community development programs as compared to their interracial and White counterparts. This paper will outline the social and financial contributions of congregations through faith-based programs and highlight other factors that predict their involvement in social service and community development.

## **Literature Review**

With government services devolving to the community level, states are seeking to partner with the 300,000-350,000 congregations that have material and spiritual resources to transform communities and the lives of their residents. Congregations are viewed as likely social welfare partners given their pervasive presence in most low-income neighborhoods and their religious mandate to serve the hungry, the homeless, the sick, the orphaned, the widowed, and the imprisoned (Cnaan, Wineburg, & Boddie, 1999). Several studies of congregation-based social services report that this tradition continues in nine out of ten congregations providing social

services (Billingsley, 1999; Grettenberger & Hovmand, 1997; Hill, 1998; Hogkinson, Weitzman, Kirsch, Noga, & Gorski, 1993; Jackson, Schweitzer, Blake, & Cato, 1997; Silverman, 2000). However, Chaves' (1999) national study documented that, overall, only 57 percent of the responding congregations reported providing social services. Of these, food distribution (33 percent) was the primary type of service provided, while only 1 percent of the congregations provided employment services. Chaves' findings suggest that congregations assume less social responsibility than expected. In fact, the social responsibility that is assumed by these congregations through the provision of short-term immediate assistance services do not address community development and the long-term support service needs of most clients exiting the welfare system (Chaves & Tsistos, 2001).

Previous research solely on African American congregations reported higher rates of service provision compared to Chaves' findings, but lower rates than most studies of congregation-based social service involvement. Among the African American congregations studied, Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) found that 71 percent provided social services. However, few were involved in services related to employment assistance (5.3 percent) and welfare rights and housing problems (7.3 percent). Billingsley's (1999) study of north central and northeast cities reported 66 percent and 69 percent involvement in social service respectively. When the types of services were examined, Billingsley found that African American congregations were most involved in the following services: food and shelter (40 percent), counseling (18 percent), education (18 percent), recreation (10 percent), and health (8 percent). Overall, 51 percent of the African American congregations provided adult family support, while 8-10 percent provided community development programs. Chaves and Higgins' (1992) comparative study reported that African American congregations were more involved in civil rights activities and social services that addressed the survival and basic needs of their immediate community. However, the White congregations studied, geared their services to family support and international relief. Similarly, Chaves' most recent study found that African American congregations are more involved in providing education, mentoring, substance abuse, and job training or job assistance programs than White congregations (Chaves & Tsistos, 2001).

As we consider whether African American congregations share a greater social responsibility for the welfare of their communities, we cannot forget that this new wave of faith-based social service provision stems from an old tradition of African American church work, which dates as far back as the eighteenth century with Absalom Jones and Richard Allen of the first African Episcopal and African Methodist Episcopal churches in Philadelphia. In each era of United States history, African American congregations like Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (Philadelphia), Abyssinian Baptist (New York), and Wheat Street Baptist (Atlanta) have served those beyond the walls of the church. African American congregations have been positioned differently compared to the mainstream social service system from their inception. For example, African Americans were excluded from the core programs of the Social Security Act of 1935 (Quagdagno, 1994). This was due to their distinct evolution within a racially segregated society and a reluctant welfare state that forced African American congregations to assume greater social responsibility for their communities. Quagdagno (1994) suggested that the War on Poverty was an effort to resolve these contradictions of American liberty, justice, and equality that racially biased policies embodied. However, though laws have changed, color-blind approaches have been instituted, and racial boundaries have shifted (Skrentny, 1995), disparities persist between

African American and White access to services as well as health, educational, and employment outcomes. For example, from 1996-1999, caseload trends for African American and White families appeared to be diverging; that is, Whites continued to have a substantially lower poverty rate and the number of White welfare recipient families was falling faster (50.6 percent decline) compared to African American families (39.6 percent decline) (Lower-Basch, 2000). The anticipated needs of African Americans will be increasingly addressed in the secular, private, or public sector post-Civil Rights era, but will continue to be met on some level within the religious sector.

As a result of the 1996 welfare reform legislation, a variety of social service needs are now left outside the scope of government programs. The supplemental services needed range from financial assistance to childcare, English as Second Language (ESL) classes to substance abuse treatment, welfare rights advocacy to earned income tax credit, and housing to asset development. With the chipping away of services provided by the government and the protraction of benefits provided by employers, the following sets of services are expected to compensate for the decreasing level of public and occupational benefits:

1. **Basic need services** such as emergency food, clothing, shelter, or financial aid.
2. **Family support services** such as after-school programs, childcare, domestic abuse programs, day care for older adults, counseling, or programs for prisoners.
3. **Education services** such as GED programs, tutoring, or ESL classes.
4. **Health services** such as substance abuse programs, cancer education and support groups, or community wellness centers.
5. **Advocacy and community organizing** such as living wage campaigns or welfare rights advocacy.
6. **Community development** such as employment training, business recruitment, housing development, or investment clubs.

As discussed earlier, congregations have been found to provide these services to varying degrees. The following factors will be considered to assess the share of social responsibility congregations assume in providing necessary social services and community development programs:

1. The number of formal services by type of services,
2. The number of beneficiaries served per month,
3. Financial investment in social provisions per month,
4. The number of collaborators.

Each measure has its own limitations; however, it is expected that this composite measurement renders a more complete view that improves our understanding of the social responsibility assumed by congregations in engaging in social and community services.

The race of congregation members is the factor expected to predict greater sharing of social responsibility; however, other factors may predict greater social involvement when providing basic needs services and community development. Previous studies have identified these factors: **congregational resources** such as financial resources, volunteers, and space (Billingsley, 1999; Chaves & Tsistos, 2001; Cnaan, et al., 2002; Dudley & Van Eck, 1992; Thomas, Quinn,

Billingsley, & Caldwell, 1994); **congregational leadership** such as paid staff and community leaders (Thomas, Quinn, Billingsley, & Caldwell, 1994); **congregational characteristics** such as denominational affiliation, political orientation, polity, theological orientation, and age of the congregation (Billingsley, 1999; Cavendish, 2000; Chang, Williams, Griffith, & Young, 1994; Chaves & Higgins, 1992; Harris, 1999); and **membership characteristics** such as age, marital status, and income level of congregation members (Ammerman, 1997; Chaves & Tsistos, 2001; Dudley & Van Eck, 1992).

## **Research Methods**

### **Data**

This research is based on data from two phases of a cross-sectional study on congregations from 1996 to 1999 (Cnaan et al., 2002). It is important to note that no single database was available to select the congregations for this study. The original data of 111 congregations housed in historic properties were collected in Chicago (16), Indianapolis (25), New York (15), Mobile (15), Philadelphia (24), and San Francisco (16). The 111 congregations were randomly selected from a list provided by local historic preservation and assistance organizations. To expand the sample to include newer congregations, multiple lists were used from denominations, other faith-based organizations, and previous research. This group of congregations established after 1940 includes small, storefront, and non-mainline congregations. The second wave of data was selected from congregations in Chicago (5), Houston (24), Indianapolis (29), Mobile (25), Philadelphia (39), and San Francisco (11). While this sample was primarily a convenience sample, it reflects some of the diversity of United States congregations as it is taken from seven cities representing each region of the country, different religious traditions, and various size congregations.

### **Study Design**

Trained interviewers collected data as part of 3-to-15 hour in-depth interviews with clergy, administrators, and program leaders. Of the respondents, 50 percent were senior clergy, 40 percent were other religious leaders (i.e. deacons, trustees), and the remaining 10 percent were lay leaders, administrators or other staff overseeing the congregation's programs. A three-part survey instrument was administered to more than one person in each congregation and written materials were collected (i.e. annual reports, church history, program reports, program brochures, and weekly bulletins) that documented the congregation's history and social service activities. Congregation leaders were asked questions related to: (a) the congregation's history and membership profile, (b) the congregation's governance and resources, (c) the nature and scope of its social and community services, and (d) up to five specific services and its resources and staffing patterns. The nature and scope of the social and community services were identified using a recognition method. By asking respondents how their congregation engaged in 190 social and community services during the last 12 months, a more consistent and reliable measure for congregation-based community involvement was established. This approach was used to minimize the possibility of overlooking service areas that some congregations considered as services and that others considered a part of their tradition or religious ministry. Six types of social services were clustered from Cnaan's (1997) 190-item social and community involvement inventory: a) basic needs services, b) family support service, c) educational services, d) health services, e) community development services, and f) advocacy services. The mean score of

formal social services from the total number for each services area was tabulated.

For each program, respondents were asked to report the number of beneficiaries (members and non-members) who were served; the time invested by clergy, volunteers, and staff; the financial investment from internal support; and the number of collaborators. The numbers reported are conservative estimates based on the maximum of five reported programs and not the total number of programs provided by each congregation on a monthly basis.

The data was analyzed using bivariate and multivariate statistics. Chi-square tests and analysis of variance were used to examine the extent to which congregations were different across groups when considering: a) the number of formal services by types of services, b) the number of beneficiaries, c) time investment in service provision, d) financial investment in social provision, and e) the number of collaborators. Ordinary least square (OLS) regression analyses were performed to explore alternative explanations for differences in the social responsibility congregations assume when providing social services and community development programs. The dependent variables were the total number of basic need services and the total number of community development programs.

### **Sample**

Of the 251 congregations in the total sample, 228 were selected when the sample was limited to those congregations with 75 percent or more African American members (70, 31 percent), 75 percent or more White members (122, 54 percent), and those with less than 75 percent of any one racial or ethnic group. The congregations without a predominant racial or ethnic group were classified as interracial (36, 16 percent). The interracial congregations were typically in a neighborhood transitioning from one predominate racial group to another. It is important to note that this sample has 7-10 times more African American congregations than other studies of this kind.

### **Sample Characteristics**

The congregations studied ranged from storefront churches with 20 members and 5 regular attendees to mega-churches with 17,600 members and 7,000 regular attendees. Across the groups, African American had most evangelical congregations (44.4 percent), followed by interracial (37.5 percent), and White (29.9 percent). However, politically, congregations were more moderate (43.4 percent, 99) with a significant percentage of moderate African American congregations (51.5 percent) and moderate interracial congregations. White congregations were predominately conservative (42.1 percent). All congregations were primarily composed of people in the age group of 35-64 years: African American (34.5 percent) and interracial (35.3 percent), and White (37.4 percent) congregations. Most members also commuted more than one mile; as such, only 37 percent of the African American congregants, 49 percent of the interracial congregants, and 37 percent of the White congregants lived in the local community of the congregation's primary facility. More than 32 percent of the congregations had annual budgets between \$100,001 and \$500,000. The socioeconomic composition of congregations in this sample was primarily lower-middle class (32.1 percent). Overall, African American congregations had 35 percent of their members with lower incomes (incomes less than \$25,000), whereas interracial (38.1 percent) and White (30.5 percent) congregations members were primarily lower-middle class (incomes \$25,001-50,000).



## Results

### **The Number and Types of Formal Services**

To examine social responsibilities assumed by African American, interracial, and White congregations, 647 social and community programs were clustered into the six types of social services mentioned earlier, and the percentage of services was reported for each service type. When examining the relationship of the predominate race of the congregation to the six programs areas, chi-test results showed that African American, interracial, and White congregations were statistically different with respect to the number of programs across the six program types. African American congregations were more involved than their counterparts in providing educational (tutoring for children and youth, 40.0 percent, scholarships for youth, 30.0 percent) and community development programs (voter registration, 41.4 percent, cooperation with police, 32.9 percent, neighborhood associations, 31.4 percent, space for police and community meetings, 31.4 percent). African American and interracial congregations were more involved in providing basic needs services (African American congregations: food pantries, 50 percent; clothing closet, 44.3 percent; street outreach to homeless, 30.0 percent; Interracial congregations: food pantries, 36.1 percent; clothing closet, 33.3 percent; street outreach to homeless, 30.0 percent). White congregations were most engaged in the following services: Summer day camp, 37.1 percent; food pantries and parenting skills, 29.5 percent)

**Table 1. Comparing African American, Interracial, and White Congregations:  
The Number of Social Service Programs**

Variable	African American Congregations <i>n</i> = 70	Interracial Congregations <i>n</i> = 36	White Congregations <i>n</i> = 122
Total number of basic need programs	58 (82.9%)	32 (88.8%)	83 (68.0%)
Total number of family support programs	69 (98.6%)	33 (91.0%)	121 (99.1%)
Total number of educational programs	29 (41.4%)	6 (16.7%)	31 (25.4%)
Total number of health programs	29 (41.4%)	19 (52.8%)	31 (48.8%)
Total number of advocacy programs	3 (4.3%)	3 (8.3%)	16 (13.1%)
Total number of community development	21 (30.0%)	8 (22.2%)	13 (10.7%)

Note.  $X^2(2, N= 901) = 33.41, p < 0.001$

### **Number of Beneficiaries**

Table 2 shows the extent to which congregations share social responsibilities by serving non-members versus members. For the congregation members benefiting, there were no significant differences across the three groups: African American congregations ( $M = 32.9$ ,  $SD = 73.1$ ), interracial congregations ( $M = 32.5$ ,  $SD = 75.6$ ) and White congregations ( $M = 38.4$ ,  $SD = 84.3$ ). The analysis of variance test was not significant [ $F(2, 226) = 0.54$ ,  $p = 0.58$ ]. However, statistical significance emerged across African American ( $M = 78.1$ ,  $SD = 126.7$ ), interracial ( $M = 108.5$ ,  $SD = 164.8$ ), and White ( $M = 103.4$ ,  $SD = 155.0$ ) congregations for the number of non-congregation members benefiting from 647 service programs. The analysis of variance test was significant [ $F(2, 226) = 3.01$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ]. The Bonferroni post hoc tests for the comparison of the number of non-congregation members benefiting from social services was found to be significantly different across all three groups at the 0.05 level. While African American congregations ( $M = 413$ ) and White congregations ( $M = 414$ ) have approximately the same number of regular attendees, as compared to the interracial congregations ( $M = 272$ ) with fewer regular attendees, it was found that interracial and White congregations serve a higher proportion of non-members compared to members.

### **Financial Investment for Programs**

Congregations investing their financial resources to provide services are assumed to share greater social responsibilities for those in need. However, it should be noted that African American (36.2 percent) and interracial (34.3 percent) congregations, primarily, had budgets under \$100,000 compared to White congregations (78.6 percent) that, primarily, had budgets over \$100,000. Therefore, instead of reporting the absolute amounts invested, the mean scores for the percentage allocated for the social budget across the three groups of congregations are reported: African American ( $M = 25.8$ ,  $SD = 21.7$ ), interracial ( $M = 24.3$ ,  $SD = 19.2$ ) and White ( $M = 19.9$ ,  $SD = 16.7$ ) congregations. The analysis of variance test was not significant [ $F(2, 226) = 2.25$ ,  $p = 0.11$ ].

### **Collaborative Partnerships**

The extent that congregations share the responsibility for providing social and community services was also explored by documenting the collaborative partnerships used to deliver many of the 647 programs reported. When the percentage of service collaborations with other congregations, private sector human service organizations, community groups, judicatory or diocese, and coalitions were examined, none of the chi-square tests were significant at the 0.05 level. However, the percentages of collaborations with government agencies were reported as follows: African American (8.6 percent), interracial (3.4 percent), and White (3.9 percent) congregations. This chi-square test reached significance ( $X^2(2, 226) = 9.03$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Congregations reported collaborating with the following government organizations: the Mayor's office, Police Department, Department of Education, Department of Recreation, and Department of Human Services. Comparatively, the percentage of congregations that were sole sponsors of social and community programs was: African American (67.7 percent), interracial (63.0 percent), and White (55.6 percent) congregations. This chi-square test also reached significance ( $X^2(2, 226) = 10.95$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

### Social Service and Community Development Models

A complex phenomenon such as the extent to which congregations share social responsibilities by providing social and community services might be explained by factors other than the predominant race of the congregation. The following organizational variables were considered as other factors explaining the extent to which congregations engage in social and community service provision: a) **congregational resources** (annual budget and the log of the membership size); b) **congregational leadership** (full-time equivalents, percentage of members that live within one mile of the congregation’s facility, and number of community leaders); c) **congregational characteristics** (political orientation, theological orientation, polity, membership pattern of growth, membership pattern of aging, and age of the congregation); and d) **membership characteristics** (age, marital status, and income level). All 13 explanatory variables were included in each of the models. The following two models are presented in Tables 6 and 7: basic needs and community development programs.

For the basic needs model, social service involvement was determined by the total number of basic needs services. The negative sign of the coefficient indicates that African American congregations provided more basic needs services. The positive sign of the annual budget indicates that congregations with larger budgets provide more basic needs services. Fifteen percent of the variance was explained by this model ( $R^2 = 0.15$ ).

**Table 2. Comparing African American, Interracial, and White Congregations: The Regression Predicting Congregations Providing Basic Needs Services**

Variable	B	SEB	B
Constant	0.65	0.40	
Race White	-0.90	-0.26	-0.25***
Race Interracial	-0.54	-0.35	-0.11
Annual budget	0.46	0.09	0.34***

Note.  $R^2 = 0.16$  ( $N = 228, p < 0.01$ )

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$

The second model (Table 3) measured social service involvement as the total number of community development services. The negative sign of the coefficient indicates that African American congregations provided more community development services. The positive sign of active membership indicates that congregations with more active members provided more community development services. Twelve percent of the variance was explained by this model ( $R^2 = 0.12$ ).

**Table 3. Comparing African American, Interracial, and White Congregations: The Regression Predicting Level of Social Responsibility Across Community Development Services**

Variable	B	SEB	B
Constant	1.93	1.17	
Race White	-1.14	-0.39	-0.17**
Active membership (logged)	1.21	0.43	0.24**
Political Orientation	-0.26	-0.32	-0.06
Theological orientation	-0.44	-0.21	-0.15
Membership trend: Growth →larger	-0.45	-0.34	-0.09
Income of members (\$50,001 - \$75,000)	-1.33-E10 <sup>2</sup>	-0.01	-0.09
Percentage of members under 12	-3.31-E10 <sup>2</sup>	-0.02	-0.08

*Note.*  $R^2=0.12$  ( $N = 228$ ,  $p < 0.01$ )

**\*\*** $p < 0.001$

The detailed results of the other four regressions can be obtained from the author of this article. The results can be summarized as follows: (1) Larger congregations with more paid staff were more likely to have more social and community programs and hence, assume greater social responsibilities related to family support services; (2) Congregations with more families were more likely to have more social and community programs related to educational services; (3) African American congregations, larger congregations, and congregations with larger annual budgets were more likely to have social and community programs related to health services; and (4) African American congregations and congregations with larger annual budgets were more likely to have social and community programs related to advocacy and community organizing services.

## Conclusion

This study concludes with a note of caution. While congregations act as community serving organizations, they have their own limitations as actors in the social welfare and social development arena. The results presented here are mixed. The cross-sectional findings provide evidence to support that African American congregations assume greater social responsibility for providing social services and community development programs when type of service, time investment, and collaborative partnerships are considered. However, they do not support the fact that African American congregations share greater social responsibility when financial

investment and beneficiaries are considered. Further attention should also be given to location and whether congregations in more distressed urban neighborhoods and rural communities share a greater social responsibility for their communities.

These findings highlight the fact that African American congregations continue to respond to a broad range of needs. However, it must be stressed that while African American congregations are more involved in some areas, they are not actively involved in providing all types of services. Overall, a greater percentage of African American congregations are involved in two of the six social service types compared to their interracial and White counterparts: educational and community development programs. In addition, regression analysis results indicate that African American congregations are more likely to provide more basic needs services, health services, advocacy/ community organizing, and community development programs. The fact that the race of the congregations was not a predictor for family support services may be attributed to the universality of religious beliefs that stress supporting, honoring, and preserving family relationships. Hence, one would expect congregations across all groups to be involved in services for families. While religious teachings also stress welfare of the poor, basic needs services did emerge as significantly different across the three groups of congregations. The greater supply of basic needs services by African American congregations might suggest the disproportionate demand for services. Similarly, the fact that African American reported more services offered on a daily and weekly basis may also reflect this demand for services. However, it should be noted that most of the congregations provide basic needs services and not the long-term family support services or community development services that would supplement government programs. Further study is needed to assess whether the services needed by non-congregation member beneficiaries are the services being provided by congregations.

In terms of the number of beneficiaries served, these findings indicate that African American congregations serve fewer members and non-members. The needs for services relative to the capacity to serve should be further explored. Would these African American congregations serve more people if they had the financial and technical resources to do so? Or do they choose a certain service mix that allows them to maintain the balance necessary to perform their religious functions? It is also important to consider the quality of the service provision and the provider-beneficiary relationship.

While these results do not support the notion that African American congregations have significantly greater financial investments, these results can be qualified by stating that relative to membership size and annual budget size, African American congregations give a significant portion (25.8 percent) of their annual budget to serve their members and the broader community. These findings also suggest that African American congregations are not providing services out of a surplus of resources, but instead while balancing their own needs to maintain their congregation's facility and membership concerns. These congregations bear the burden of caring for the needs of members and non-members largely with congregational support.

Collaborations may be one way that congregations manage the resource limitations of operating social and community services. Therefore, it should not be a surprise that African American congregations would have more limited financial resources and would also report more collaborations with government agencies. These results support Chaves and Tsistos' (2001)

findings that congregation-based services are quite connected with public and private social service networks. As the government seeks to engage faith-based organizations in partnerships, it should be acknowledged that African American, interracial, and White congregations have distinct social and community service profiles and financing patterns. Careful study and planning should be conducted as the government seeks to increase partnerships with the religious sector. In addition, existing policies and practices that have a goal of “leveling the playing field” should acknowledge the ways these congregations already share social responsibilities without government support, and develop strategies that will improve social service delivery across the religious and secular social service sector. These lessons will have both national and global implications as government retrenchment has become a global trend and other countries are beginning to consider the extent to which their religious sector shares in the social responsibility to care for those in need.

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