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Strengthening Black Churches: A Collaborative Approach

by Sylvia R. Johnson

Throughout United States history the Black Church has played a significant role in the Black community. As one of a few truly African-American institutions, the Black Church, led by skilled, committed pastors and lay leaders, has served as an anchor for the survival and achievement of the African-American community. Black churches bring to their social ministries and neighborhood revitalization efforts a wealth of strengths and assets including a set of values, a self-help philosophy, an emphasis on leadership development, and human resources which are all brought to bear on the myriad of social, economic and moral issues confronting Black people. In the early 1990s, Boston-area foundations began supporting the work of several Black churches in the community. After initial data gathering and reflection, foundations concluded that Black churches have a unique and critical role to play in building and sustaining the Black community and that foundations can further their own goals by forming new partnerships with Black churches.

One such partnership is the Black Church Capacity Building Program (BCCBP). Established in 1995 by the Hyams Foundation, the BCCBP is a collaboration of funders and churches that provides technical assistance, training and other resources to African-American churches and faith-based ministries that are developing and implementing human service and community revitalization programs in African-American neighborhoods of Boston, Cambridge, and Lynn, Massachusetts. It was developed through a six-month strategic planning process involving Black clergy, grantmakers, community leaders, and professional consultants who came together to identify and design the BCCBP program components.

BCCBP's primary goal is to strengthen the capacity of African-American churches and faith-based ministries to develop, run and manage high quality programs and projects focused on such areas as economic development, youth development, community organizing and advocacy and the development of space for community programs. BCCBP is guided by the conviction that this partnership will strengthen both parties and help each to achieve its mission more effectively. Current funders include The Boston Foundation, Boston Globe Foundation, Clipper Ship Foundation, Hyams Foundation, and Lotus Development Corporation. Twenty-five applications were received for BCCBP's first round of technical assistance grants and seven Black churches have been approved for the first cycle of funding. These churches are Born Again Evangelistic Outreach Ministries, Christ Temple Church of Personal Experience, Emmanuel Temple Church, Faith Pentecostal Church, Mount Calvary Holy Church, Saint Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church, and Zion Baptist Church. Five of the seven churches are Pentecostal churches.

Church grantees sponsor a wide variety of social ministries including youth leadership development, social service programs, economic development, short-term and permanent residential programs, child care, private schools and church-based community organizing. Each of these churches will be assisted by one or more technical assistance providers specializing in those areas. The churches and technical assistance providers were selected by a 12-member steering committee of church representatives and funders.

BCCBP is premised on the belief that Black churches and faith-based ministries have a unique and critical role to play in building and sustaining the Black community. In a recent article, Lynn Huntley, the former director of Ford Foundation's Rights and Social Justice Program, highlights the strengths this Foundation finds in Black churches.[1] They include a track record of achievements and credibility; good access and true penetration of the community; cost-effective, results-oriented programs; and a long history of community service, civil rights and public policy advocacy. Huntley further reminds us that these institutions receive most of the charitable contributions made by African Americans and are really indigenous expressions of the community's philanthropic traditions.

While acknowledging that the Black Church plays a central role in the community, the BCCBP strategic planning members also observed that the Black community has changed, becoming more diverse and geographically dispersed. This has created a new set of challenges. The Black Church no longer exists as the sole point of focus for Black neighborhoods. Given this reality, the Church must find ways to tap more fully into the broad array of talent that exists within the Church and community and to build partnerships with external resources. Technical assistance that builds on the strengths of the Black Church will help churches and faith-based ministries deal with new challenges and be more effective in addressing community priorities. The BCCBP project seeks to build the skills and leadership of pastors, lead organizational and program staff, and lay members.

Technical assistance provided through BCCBP includes a variety of professional services in areas such as program/social ministry assessment, strategic planning, community organizing, business and economic development, financial management, leadership development, facility development and computers and technology. BCCBP focuses on African-American neighborhoods and gives preference to churches or faith-based ministries that are located and carry out their ministry in low-income neighborhoods; have substantial support for technical assistance among church leadership;

have made a financial and human resource commitment to the technical assistance project; and have a track record of community involvement.

The technical assistance will strengthen the skills and knowledge needed to create or develop existing social ministries and programs. It will not, however, carry out social ministry/program development and management tasks on behalf of a church. BCCBP grantees will come together periodically for group training and information sharing. Also, churches and faith-based ministries not chosen for the first funding cycle are invited to participate in group trainings on financial management, computer technology, grantsmanship and leadership development.

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Challenges to Working with Black Churches

In many ways, philanthropic institutions and Black churches have common agendas. Numerous social ministries sponsored by Black churches are addressing community needs which fall within the parameters of grantmaking guidelines for local funders. While grantmaking institutions and Black churches have many common goals, they operate very differently. It is important to make certain that there is a common understanding of terms (i.e. program, ministry, capacity building, stewardship, accountability, etc.) and that both sets of institutions understand the different decision-making and approval processes in place. Many church leaders have little knowledge of, or experience with, organized philanthropy and many funders know very little about Black churches; therefore, it is important to share information about grantmaking and the history and structure of Black churches. It is equally important to provide clarity regarding expectations and roles on both sides.

Partnerships between organized philanthropy and Black churches are developing in cities and towns across the country. As these relationships grow, the following questions need to be continuously addressed by funders: Are these partnerships structured in the form of "special initiatives" or are they a part of regular grantmaking activities? How do funders initiate communication with Black churches? Do funders structure communication and outreach differently for Black church partnerships? Are there different strategies for working successfully with large versus small churches, individual churches versus church-based collaboratives, technical assistance versus program grants? Do partnerships have funds for staffing? How are Black church leaders involved in the creation and development of these partnerships?

At the same time, funder/Black church partnerships should prompt us to seek answers to additional questions related to impact: Are social ministry programs sponsored by Black churches becoming more effective? Are existing ones expanding and new ones being created? Are funders changing their grantmaking policies or approaches because of Black church partnerships? Are attitudes or preconceived ideas about Black churches and funders changing? Are churches receiving new financial and in-kind support to implement social ministry programs? Are churches learning how to access resources?

Too little information is known (by funders and the larger society) about existing social ministry programs offered by Black churches. While several well-known books have been published, it is important to know more about the kinds of programs offered. Do these programs operate regularly, or on an "as needed" basis? What civil rights, advocacy, or public policy activities occur? What percentage of programs are offered in collaboration with other churches, community resources or public/private organizations? Who staffs these services or activities?

Conclusion

Each of the questions above need to be answered and addressed if Black churches and philanthropic organizations are to develop partnerships which assist the Black community. Exploring the answers to these questions will serve to enlighten and enrich the experiences of both parties.

Funders and Black churches are excited about their emerging relationship. While some funders may have approached this initiative in a typical "grantor-grantee" model, most funders have come to realize that there is mutual benefit in developing partnerships with Black churches. Involving Black clergy and lay leaders in the planning, implementation, and staffing of this project has enhanced grantmaking to the community. The interactive nature of this partnership has taken funders to a new level of understanding "community assets," and we hope to draw from this experience to make our grantmaking more empowering and meaningful in future years.

Note
[1] Lynn Huntley, "Why We Fund Church-Based Programs," *Ford Foundation News & Commentary* (May/June 1995).

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