

Inner Cities as “Convictional Communities”:

How the Black Church Supports Urban Youth

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Community Literacy and Intercultural Communication

Fifteen year old Desiree Bailey doesn't go to the mall on Friday nights, nor does she hang at a friend's house. Desiree Bailey spends every Friday night in a church. She is a Black, Pentecostal Christian who prays, reads the bible, and participates in youth activities in the Black church.

From this description, Desiree Bailey seems unreal, unheard of. She is not even close to the stereotype of the Black teen that we have become so accustomed to through films, television, and the news media. Desiree is actually one of many inner-city Black teens who participates in church services and activities.

As a mentor at the Community Literacy Center on Pittsburgh's North Side, I had the privilege of working with Desiree and learning about her experiences as a Pentecostal Christian. Born and raised a Roman Catholic, I have been aware of the powerful, dynamic nature of the Black church for a very long time. However, I have never had the opportunity to inquire about what it really means to be a member of such a strong, community-based organization.

This inquiry is my attempt as an outsider—a non-Black Catholic—to explore and better understand how church, the Black church, in particular, works as a network of support in an inner-city teen's life. It is my purpose to show, through case-study, research, and personal experience, how church differs from other organizations available to teens. The Black church is especially unique, because it not only acts as a religious guide, but also as an outlet for social interaction. The religious aspect is important of course, but not to my inquiry. The Black church has a responsibility in the community to support and guide its young people, and in reality, religion is *not* the best way to attract youth. However, the church relies upon other types of values to instill a sense of identity and self-worth in the teens of the congregation. In many ways, a race war still exists in this country. Throughout history, the Black church has provided hope and solidarity for an oppressed people, and even today, that same urgency remains.

Background of Black Church

The "Black Church" is a product of various religious influences. In the first quarter of the century, the Black church found followings in certain U.S. cities. Chicago, New Orleans, New York, Detroit, and Kansas City were amongst the most popular areas for what was known as the Black Spiritual Movement.¹ I was interesting in finding out how much of an influence the Catholic Church had on the beginnings of the Black church denominations. Apparently, it made quite an impact. Black churches inherited elements of Spiritualism, Roman Catholicism, and Voodooism or hoodoo (Baer 18). Unlike Catholicism, however, the Black churches did not adhere to strict rules or rituals. During the antebellum period in the South, Blacks created their own versions of Protestantism. The slave-owners obviously influenced the type of religions that Blacks practiced. In turn, Blacks held on to the Protestantism of their owners, but they gradually altered these religions in response to racial stratification and discrimination. The most well-known denominations are Baptist, Methodist, Holiness, and Pentecostal (Church of God in Christ) (Baer 18).

As I stated earlier, Desiree is Pentecostal. When I asked her how her church varied from other churches, she couldn't answer, because she has only been exposed to two other churches, both of which are very similar to Pentecostal: "I've been to my Grandmother's church. Well, both of them. One is Apostolic and one is Baptist. But I really don't see a big difference." There are, however, many similarities between Desiree's church and my church. It is difficult to say *how* the Black church ac-

quired so many of the Catholic elements, especially since there is a small percentage of Black Catholics nationwide (Baer 120). Black spiritual churches make use of Catholic accoutrements such as crucifixes or crosses; statues of Jesus Christ, the Blessed Virgin, and the saints; incense burners; and holy pictures. They also use the altar in much the same way as Catholics do (Baer 121).

The Black church has a reputation among outsiders for being influential in Black movements and protests. However, not *all* sects encourage social revolt amongst their congregations. In his book, *The Black Spiritual Movement*, author Hans Baer explores the motivations of specific Black church sects. He has divided the sects into four types: *the mainstream denominations*, *conversionist sects*, *messianic-nationalist sects*, and *a thau-maturgical/manipulationist strategy*. Desiree belongs to a conversionist sect. Pentecostals take in their members as if they were a family. They also adopt puritanical and expressive attitudes, while offering hope of other-worldly salvation (160). The latter two sects mentioned above tend to practice more extreme methods of reaching the “American Dream” such as intolerance and chauvinism. Currently, however, these sects are either dying out or keeping a low-profile. Desiree’s church steers away from teaching racial intolerance and anger. Like the Catholic Church, though, the Pentecostals remain puritanical in their views of sex:

Me: Have you learned from church how to deal with racism, or violence, or sex, education? Like, for yourself, or for other people?

Desiree: Well, first and foremost sex. (pause) You know, from the bible, you’re not supposed to till you’re married. That taught me something. Ummm, racism. We don’t have to result to it.

Centrality of Church in the Black Community

Church is a source of pride for the Black community in that it offers both spiritual and tangible rewards. Among the spiritual rewards is the promise of a happier afterlife. Tangible rewards include monetary support, food, and emotional counseling. Throughout history, Blacks who have decided to participate in church have increased the quality of their family lives, as well as aspired to higher individual goals:

Me: How has church or religion shaped you, do you think?

Desiree: It’s made me different. I’m not like other females. I set different expectations for myself.

Me: So, it’s made you different from a lot of other girls your age?

Desiree: (strongly) Yeah... Oh yeah.

Most Black church congregations are 80% female.² Desiree receives a lot of support from her mother and grandmother. She says that church and her mother keep her out of trouble. Ironically, even though her father is a pastor, Desiree claims that her grandmother has more of a religious influence on her: “I just can’t explain it. If you met her, you would understand what I was saying. She’s very religious. She doesn’t want me to go *all* the time to where if I keep goin’ now, when I get older, I’m not gonna want to. But... she is very religious... to the utmost.” Mothers and grandmothers play an instrumental role in bringing new youth into the church. Most teens don’t go to church for religious or spiritual reasons. They require a middle-man, or in most cases, a middle-woman, to introduce them to the church. Women of the church provide a nurturing love that appeals to teens who do not receive this

support elsewhere. Dr. Wayne Peck, minister and head of the Community Literacy Center, comments on the importance of adult love in the Black church: “My sense is that kids really don’t give a darn about the religious nature. They understand or not whether adults care and whether they love. And so, I don’t think that kids are self-selecting themselves into qualities of religion as much as they want the attitudes of love and concern and high expectation.”

Throughout the years, chauvinism and male-dominance have been noted in the Black church. For the most part, there hasn’t been much opposition to it, but there’s always been a silent power struggle between the men and the women of the church. In the essay “How I Got Over and Continue to Do So in Our Mothers’ Churches,” writers Jack J. Daniel and Geneva Smitherman-Donaldson argue that women are the reason the Black church has remained strong:

Black women have been the key to maintaining the institutional structure of the traditional Black church as well as the critical cultural products emanating from that church. . . .
. . . Black women. . . carefully structure the environment. Hugs and kisses flow freely as they greet Black women and others. Dyadic and small group conversations are sprinkled throughout the pews. Smiles, head nods, and other body language are used to conduct conversations across the aisles. . . As Evangeline Grant Redding put it, “Without the black woman, and the support and communication she so fervently and tirelessly renders, the oldest, most entrenched, richest, and most influential institution and government of black humanity might sink into hopeless oblivion” (Daniel 43).

I foresee in Desiree’s future that, like the women rejoiced above, she will foster love and spiritual growth in her church community. I recall the first time I realized she was a very religious person. One of Desiree’s peers at the CLC walked into the room and made a somewhat derogatory remark towards her. Desiree did not respond in an equally negative manner. Instead, after the girl left the room, Desiree turned to me and said something to the effect of “If I didn’t go to church, I would have started a fight with that girl.” As amusing as this anecdote seems, it perplexes me that Desiree cites “church” as an influence so often. Is she giving church too much credit? Does she even have a personal spirituality that has *not* been molded by her Pentecostal church?

Since I was brought up as a Roman Catholic and still practice this faith, I am very aware that organized religions can, more often than not, limit our view of alternative methods of spirituality. It wasn’t until high school that I was exposed to other religions in my Catholic High School religion class. These religions were still treated as if they were inferior to Catholicism. Much like Desiree, although much less frequently, I went to church every week and was adamant that I would remain Catholic my entire life. However, while in college, I started questioning a lot of my church’s dogma. I still consider myself a religious person, but I wonder if it is healthy for a church, even a socially progressive Black church, to discourage an understanding of other religions and alternatives:

Me: Do you ever wonder about other religions or other churches? Like wonder if they’re any better or worse than your church, or just curious at all?

Desiree: No, not really. (matter of factly)

Me: Do you think that you may ever change religions, or if you get married to someone who may be a different religion than you, or maybe stop believing in God... and if so, why?

Desiree: No, not at all. I think I'll always be believing in God, always go to church. Through marriage and religion, I don't think it will change.

Furthermore, the Black church tends to play a coercive role in some members' lives. For as liberal as some Black churches have become, some are still quite strict. This strictness works as a negative aspect in the attrition of teens and young adults:

One likely consequence of attempts within church communities to regulate behavior and sanction deviance is *selection*—individuals who lack family commitment and who embrace libertine values and conduct may become estranged from congregational life, perhaps permanently. There is mounting evidence that significant numbers of young, urban African American males are abandoning organized religion for precisely these reasons, a pattern with potentially staggering long-term implications for both African American families and churches.³

Case Study

In writing an inquiry, one must approach the issue from all sides, considering the positive effects of church on a teen and also the negative ones. In order to do this, I embarked on an interview-based case-study of Desiree Bailey, Dr. Wayne Peck, and seven of my classmates in “Community Literacy and Intercultural Interpretation”: Alana, Scott, Lynn, Beth, Tracy, Joanne, and Lisa. The following questions must be explored in order to understand how people view the church as a network of support and in turn, to realize what the church does well already and what it could work on in terms of attracting inner-city youth. I chose these particular responses, because they provide an insight and point of view from people who have already experienced adolescence.

What makes a religious organization that reaches out to inner-city youth different from some other activity like sports or a musical?

Scott: Religion is a unique situation that changes the dynamics of all of those around it. Sports and other activities are never on the same level of experience. In addition there is usually a large diversity of age compared to other activities.

Lynn: I think religious organizations are effective in the sense that they do address real issues like drugs, pregnancy, sex, etc... sports clubs tend no to.

Beth: I don't know that there is a huge difference. Let me explain a little. Where some might have ultimate faith in God, I have ultimate faith in myself. I've had many religious discussions with Christian friends of mine who are often surprised that I truly understand what it means for them to believe in God and Jesus because that is sort of what it means for me to believe in myself. So... I figure sports and music can teach a teen to have faith in themselves and their abilities where church may teach a teen faith in God. I honestly don't know which is better, can't say that I think I'll ever know, but the bottom line is that faith in something is hugely important, so whatever teaches it is necessary support.

Tracy: There seems to be more morality, more safety in a religious organization, but there is also more control. Religious organizations tend to command control of many aspects of a person's life, without tolerance for difference.

Joanne: I think that sports and theatre are beneficial, there is a sense of competition, while church provides an acceptance without judgement or competition (that's the impression I get).

Wayne Peck: What I think a good church-based organization does is help kids deal with developing a stronger sense of self and place in the world. By that, I mean how deep are the roots with which kids can become rooted and also have wings within their communities of choice. The religious or church-based communities can point to specific stories in the culture... The gospels, for instance, in the Christian church. The Hebrew scriptures or the Koran allow conversation to happen around the events of scripture which allows people to develop a deeper sense of identity, perhaps a sense of calling, a sense of purpose, a sense of what their values are.

Why do you think Black teens attend church? Would you attribute most of it to their parents, friends, or their own convictions?

Alana: I think the reason most people attend church is because their parents do... and their grandparents did... and all of their neighbors and friends do... so they do it.

Scott: In a bleak situation hope is sometimes the only thing to hold on to. I think social pressure and an attraction to doing something, anything is better than nothing, is what motivates inner-city teens to go to church. Few teens truly understand and attend church on their own convictions.

Lynn: From my experiences at black churches, they are very charismatic and fun. The word of God and all the joy and happiness is really seen in the energy. Perhaps that's why teens attend church. It's not as boring as most white traditional churches are.

Tracy: I think that a child whose parents do not attend church, will not find it on his own until he is older and more mature, unless of course a friend draws him in. Yet, having a parent attend church cannot guarantee a loyalty from a teen—that they need to find on their own. I think that teens looking for a safe place to exist will often find it in church—but this is just a guess.

Lisa: Yes—I'd say that black teens, and any children for that matter, are taught by their parents, and their parents before them, to value the church with such strong conviction. I think, in many ways, religion is a taught thing, a learned thing. Children are programmed to believe. But, that's not necessarily a bad thing. I'm not sure... but I think the black church is such a valued thing because it has been for so long—throughout history, when blacks were treated like shit in this country, religion was something that they could cling to—their faith in God kept them going, convinced them that one day things might get better. I think in many way, that still applies.

What has church done or has the potential to do for inner-city youth?

Scott: In some ways the inner-city church is great because it offers a sense of family, although it may be for the wrong reasons, at least it is there. At least there will be people who care.

Tracy: It has the potential to offer a caring, safe, supportive, and encouraging environment to teens in

need of an escape from the violent realities of inner-city life. One opportunity I don't think enough of them take, is to offer tolerance of others and exposure to different types of people—a church can be protective without being sheltering. Sheltering others from difference or even reality is never a good thing.

Wayne Peck: We developed Community Literacy as a way of being in touch and being in action, trying to get youth voices into the middle of adult discussions, having youth texts speak when adults need to decide what is good for youth. The irony of that. So, I think what needs to happen is a fundamental change of people's attitudes toward what they don't understand and the ability to erase the difference. Somehow the church has a very difficult time. I don't know what I mean when I say the church. There are a million churches. They do it differently. Some do it well. Some don't. I hope that we do it well here by trying to create conversational spaces where everybody gets an ample opportunity to shape the problem or the issue that's being addressed and that there are cooperative, collaborative ways of proceeding to try to solve these problems. If you involve teenagers in the midst of that kind of problem-solving, you're half way there.

Although dichotomies exist within the inner-city church, it provides a wealth of support, guidance, and education to teens. It can even provide opportunities for travel and increased social activity. Desiree travels with her church's youth group. They go to "Seven Springs, Ohio. Well, we have, within the United States, a youth convention. Ours is the end of June this year. We're going to Ohio. The drill team is going to Ohio. Ummm, we go basically everywhere. Even if it's just Geauga Lake, Idewild Park, Indianapolis, North Carolina, Florida, California, everywhere." With these examples as evidence, I can now assert that churches *do* provide a safe haven from the streets.

Church is a choice. A teen can decide between the street corner and the youth group. The main difference between these modes of "hanging out" is that adults are prevalent in the church atmosphere in order to provide attention, feedback, and love. With street corners come temptation: drugs, sex, violence.

With drug addiction, gangs, teenage pregnancy, and illiteracy still prevalent in the inner-city, the Black church has a responsibility to teach prevention methods and alternatives. Programs such as "The Black Church Initiative" and the Community Literacy Center, however, have created a successful combination of church and community that offer diverse viewpoints. "The Black Church Initiative," for example, schedules summits across the country in order to address teen childbearing, sexuality education, unplanned pregnancies, and other reproductive health issues.⁴ In addition, the Community Literacy Center on the North Side commits itself to widening the religious views of teens. The CLC's director, Wayne Peck understands the importance of "spirituality": "I have a world class commitment to bringing kids into a sense of spirituality, a spiritual consciousness that has to do with learning from the inside out and learning about the alternatives for the way peoples of God or peoples of Faith deal with theology."

The Black church has helped Desiree Bailey become an intelligent, successful, passionate young woman. Regardless of the drawbacks of organized religion, the Black church has and will continue to offer its community vast amounts of spiritual and social support. For me, the Catholic church has often provided me with security and belonging. However, I never experienced the same opportunities for travel and social interaction as Desiree does. If for no other reason than that, Desiree is lucky to be an inner-city teen.

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¹ Baer, Hans A. *The Black Spiritual Movement: A Religious Response to Racism*. The University of Tennessee Press: Knoxville, 1984. P. 18. Future references to this book will be cited in parentheses in the text and will refer to this edition.

² Daniel, Jack J. and Geneva Smitherman-Donaldson. "How I Got Over and Continue to Do So in Our Mothers' Churches" in *Cultural Communication and Intercultural Contact*, Donal Carbaugh, ed. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: Hillsdale, 1990. P. 44. Future references to this book will be cited in parentheses in the text and will refer to this edition.

³ Ellison, Christopher G. "Religious Involvement and the Subjective Quality of Family Life Among African Americans" in *Family Life in Black America* by Robert Joseph Taylor, et al. SAGE Publications: Thousand Oaks, 1997.

⁴ <http://www.rcrc.org/bci/>