

Preliminary Findings

National Black Church Task Force Initiative on Crime and Criminal Justice

hosted by the

National Religious Affairs Association of the National Association of Blacks in Criminal Justice

July 20-23, 2003

Urban League Report Outlines Plight, Progress in report, State of Black America

With a third of Black families “trapped near or below the poverty line,” Black America will remain socially stagnant in the 21st century unless its communities experience less crime, demand political respect and exploits its economic power, says Marc H. Morial, President and CEO of the National Urban League (NUL).

“Without a stronger and broader superstructure of stable families, African-Americans won’t stand a chance of meeting the rigors imposed by the forces swirling in the 21st-century global arena,” Morial says in an overview to the group’s annual “State of Black America” report.

“For the health and strength of Black families en masse - their ability as a collective to form vibrant, relatively crime-free communities, to demand respect and services from the federal, state and local political power structures, and to better capture economic assets they can pass on to their children-has become to an even greater degree a critical component of African-American’s push into the American mainstream.”

In an abstract by Dr. James R. Lanier, Senior Resident Scholar for Community Justice Programs of NUL and a participant in the black church criminal justice task force initiative, “America must reform the criminal justice and penal system to make fairness a central principle of the former and make rehabilitation-an emphasis on drug treatment, the elimination of educational and vocational deficits, and family counseling where applicable—a staple of the latter. Only then can we expect the reentry problems ex-offenders face to be reduced and the high rate of recidivism to diminish. African Americans, as individuals and as a community, must take a forceful leadership role in the reform movement, for it is they have been the primary targets of the “get tough” crime policies fashioned in the decade after the civil rights victories of the 1960s dismantled the legal structure of segregation and discrimination.”

Transforming the nation’s attitudes about incarceration—so that the criminal justice system is used in ways that are *smart*, and not just “tough”—is a difficult task, to be sure.



Reassessing the commitment to its mission and problems to be faced by black people and communities in the new millennium, in 2000, criminal justice officials and the church became allies in a plan to facilitate assistance in transition and healing against the some of grave realities. Many of these are cited in the Urban League’s recent “State of Black America” report. Now in 2003, led by the National Religious Affairs Association (NRAA) of the National Association of Blacks in Criminal Justice (NABCJ), Phase III of a multi-year campaign was launched July 20-23, 2003, in St. Louis, Missouri, to rally the armies of faith and justice. The special meeting was part of the 30th National Conference and Training Institute of NABCJ.

Inspired by Dr. John J. DiIulio, Jr., recommendations offered through the Public Influence of African American Church Project of Morehouse College and the Faith and Service Technical Education Network (FASTEN) of the National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC), the National Black Church Task Force Initiative on Crime and Criminal Justice began an aggressive journey to bridge age-old divides and hurdles with a goal to generate an equitable partnership agenda for black churches. The agenda will address areas of weakness in crime prevention and criminal justice, and provide guidance to clearly identify common ground for solutions between the black church, criminal justice systems, and all related stakeholders.

In Our Opinion . . .

- As a preliminary step during the 2003 meeting, a survey was administered to two sample groups of people via written questionnaire:
 - **GROUP ONE:** Sixty eight (68) of the attendees of the National Black Church Task Force Initiative on Crime and Criminal Justice, the largest portion of whom were pastors, clergy, laypersons, scholars, and non-profit organizational representatives (in that order)
 - **GROUP TWO:** Fifty (50) criminal justice professionals serving juvenile/ family courts
- These two groups were considered proportionate to the larger group of attendees for the full conference.
- The survey results have provided public positions and reactions to why there has been a lack of national engagement on issues of social welfare for offenders and their families, areas of weakness between black churches, crime prevention, and the criminal justice system, and the greatest overall challenges perceived in generating appropriate action around this problem and population.
- The informal surveys brought responses from a self-selected group of people – those who were more personally interested in the issue of crime, criminal justice, solutions, the black church and community.
- Avoiding opportunities for agency bias, the anonymous survey and selected groups were used to accurately report on what people who work in the church and the field of law enforcement/criminal justice know or want to know.
- The survey was used as a progress report to gather data needed to gauge whether a central plan seemed to exist for black churches to respond to fundamental issues of crime and criminal justice at the local and national level. If so, responses from the survey would be used to see if that plan has been acceptable to the public perception of what people are thinking.
- The survey will be administered again in one year to test whether opinions are changing, particularly evaluating the progress of the initiative.
- Results from the survey can and will be useful to the criminal justice and black church leaders or to elected officials and community leaders.
- The results will be used to guide efforts to meet public concerns and develop effective messages for public information and/or for a media strategy in areas of crime and criminal justice.
- The survey has already provided a framework for action by the task forces and meaningful clues to the likely level of public acceptance of a plan, program, or process.

Deficits in National Engagement on Issues of Social Welfare with Offender Populations & Their Families

The following opinions responded to why there are deficits in national engagement on issues of social welfare with offender populations and their families. In analyzing this data and assigning the responsibilities of further discussion as well as ways to identify how the black church can assist in moving these comments to action, as applicable, task forces have been formed and are referenced by alphabet.

Some of the responses indicated in the questionnaires must be dealt with at an agency or higher level. Those issues are shaded.

The name of each task force begins with “The National Black Church Criminal Justice Task Force On . . .” and continues its name to reference its unique area of responsibility:

- A. Reentry and Mentoring of Offenders
- B. Strengthening Marriages and Families
- C. Ministry and Youth with Behavioral/Adverse Challenges (*commonly known as hi-risk*)
- D. Racial Disparity, Disenfranchisement, and Disproportionate Minority Confinement in the Criminal Justice System
- E. Restorative Justice and Ministry in Prisons
- F. Black Female Offenders
- G. Mentoring Children of Offenders
- H. Public Education and Civic Engagement
- I. Crime Prevention and Intervention

Survey Responses

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Appropriate leadership not interested									
Government and communities are fragmented									
Public perception is that offenders are black									
The need is not glamorous									
The targeted population has no political power									
Offenders and their families are not a top priority									
There is a lack of empathy for offenders who really have remorse and desire to change									
There is a lack of desire by the community to become involved									
Poor people, families of prisoners, and particularly blacks do not exercise their right to vote									
Upwardly mobile staff flee to avoid working with this population									

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Survey Responses

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Offenders and their families are not regarded as valued constituents									
The mindset of society is that social welfare is not important									
Criminal justice officials have their plates full already and no time to properly communicate with the community.									
Poor people cost money and do not generate any.									
Affluent people have a low percentage of contact with the economically and otherwise oppressed									
Affluent people are not the ones in need and are therefore not aggressively using their leverage to positively influence legislation									
Systems prefer to focus on issues that place a band-aid on the issue and avoid the core problems									
There are biases within the criminal justice system									
People maintain an attitude that it this doesn't apply to me.i									
People feel powerless to make a difference									
The power structure of agency stakeholders fear itstepping on each others toesi to the point of non-effectiveness									
Local management issues, to include the appearance of racial indifference and prejudice within the system, produce ineffective staff									
There is a lack of family leadership on these issues									

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Survey Responses

Communities fear the crime, particularly that of juveniles, and want action, not realizing they can help

People feel that once the jails and prisons are built and persons are incarcerated, the problem is fixed

As crime affects the black community in greatest proportion, it can be implied that there is a loss of connection to the riches and lessons of black history and pride

Many feel that everyone should be responsible for themselves and should not require assistance.

There is a consensus that offenders should be held accountable without the balance of how to help them change inappropriate behavior and be responsible

Leaders use criminal justice issues as a political platform without action to back it up

The families and victims of juvenile and adult offenders are invisible

Offenders, juvenile and adults, are ostracized

Discipline and abuse have been identically defined and laws prevent the constructive and appropriate use of discipline; thus, there is a lack of respect by juveniles and youth for authority

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Blind, But Now I See, or Do I?

If it were a program we were planning, even with little or no time left, or a sermon for which a clergy was awaiting confirmation to preach, this task might be less challenging and sensitive. These are things that are traditionally experienced in church life. But it's not. It is tremendously difficult for many of us to take a critical look at the black church, most of all, leaders and those of us who are devout members. We see the problem. . . we complain among ourselves about the problem. . . we voice our frustration when we are away from the church about the problem. . .but we just won't tackle the problem. After all, the black church has been the nucleus of the black community for hundreds of years, and the black preacher has been bestowed a level of respect unlike any other leader. Even the drunkest of drunks or the roughest of bullies tend to respect preachers in many cases.

But if we are going to be realistic and honest about where some of these problems lie, we have to be honest about what WE are not doing. Since everyone else would rather tolerate it than be the one who raises the issue, let's use the highly appropriate words to this and other issues as written by the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his letter from a Birmingham jail:

Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent and often even vocal sanction of things as they are.

But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.

It should be clearly noted that in no way does this initiative suggest that the full responsibility of gamut of issues to be addressed through the **National Black Church Task Force Initiative on Crime and Criminal Justice** falls exclusively upon the black church. Quite the contrary. Offenders have a role they must carry; families have a role they much assume; and the list goes on and on. But just be the prime directive of ministry, difficult questions must be asked. For example, in the responses given, you will see reference to the need for training by churches. There is absolutely no doubt that this is true. However, when complaining that there are a lack of monies or knowledge, would it be more fair to say that leaders and laypersons of black churches have no money to invest or do not find it to be a priority to attend meetings to learn more about the crisis of crime and the chilling effects on the family, church members, or to inquire about how the church can participate in helping to break the cycle. In contrast clergy and laypersons will spend thousands of dollars in hotel and travel fees, meals, lost days at work, and new wardrobes to attend a denominational meeting where it is never mandatory to discuss this issue.

Responding to a request to identify areas of weakness between black churches, crime prevention, and criminal justice systems, the following opinions were given (*some are similar*):

- Churches are unable to properly assess areas of greatest need
- Churches are in tremendous need of training
- Lack of financial resources
- Churches have a general lack of knowledge and assertiveness to learn about the criminal justice system and do not know where to begin
- Church leaders are not willing to look past their own agendas
- There is a reluctance on the part of congregations to identify with offenders
- Failure on the part of pastors to look at this ministry as a priority or central core of outreach
- Ministers expound from the pulpit but put no power or action behind it
- There is a lack of communication between the church and criminal justice systems
- Churches are reactive instead of proactive to the issues
- Churches focus too much attention on what occurs inside church walls
- Members of black churches no longer live in the communities around the church and consequently do not always have to face the problems in the depressed areas
- There is a lack of parental involvement in church programs
- Churches are too financially motivated
- Family involvement in churches have depreciated
- Pastors are too concerned about turf issues
- People are not honest about the real issues and choose to only deal with superficial issues
- Churches will not collaborate on this issue
- Churches want money first before proving service
- People do not want to admit this population is in the church, and in some cases, have been put out of the church
- Churches select only high profile issues to push for justice instead of the rights of all humans
- The church has forgotten God's righteousness and have been actively engaged in establishing its own righteousness more tailored to their ambitions
- Churches are too competitive of each other
- Churches are stifled by the "victim mentality"
- "Big Me, Little You" syndrome
- Churches do not feel any of this is their responsibility

There is a template by which we will address these issues. The desired outcome is a denominational model which epitomizes response by the black church on issues of crime and criminal justice without compromising the church's mission in meeting the spiritual needs of its people.

There was absolute too much ground to cover July 20-23; however, we knew that the

Blind. But Now I See. Or Do I?

meeting would only be a very early stage to a multi-year task.

Ultimately, the template will involve:

1. **A Denominational Assessment**

- A. An infrastructure that would support the work
 - (1) Identification of existing local church models within denominations
 - (2) Analyzing the level of readiness by local churches and the national body
 - a. By the leaders, including national leadership
 - b. At the lay/congregational level

2. **Denominational Plan**

- A. Who has to buy in
- B. MOU w/NABCJ detailing desired outcomes
- C. Awareness building
- D. Training
- E. Infrastructure to monitor the development

3. **An overall agenda for black churches** (*to include, but not exclusive to*)

- A. What are the primary concerns for crime and criminal justice that can be easily addressed with assistance from the black church
- B. How much time in the church's calendar will be allotted for training
- C. Budgeting for crime prevention/intervention and criminal justice strategy and educational enhancement, as needed
- D. Relationship with "the system"
- E. How to identify local and state statistics
- F. Identifying internal strategies for congregational engagement
- G. "Saturday Sunday School"
- H. National and local observance of Justice Sunday
- I. Church partnership clusters
- J. How to assess the impact of crime on your congregation
- K. Understanding the continuum of crime

Of those who comprised the task forces, some initial commitments were made by representatives of various bodies for action in the interim as we further develop this plan.

Areas of Concern	Group	Action Steps
Policy/Issue Development	American Baptists	Will take the information discussed in the DMC task force to the existing policy boards
		Will request that denominational action would be developed
	National Black Law Students Association (NBLSA)	Use student groups to create action/recommendations/advocacy
	National Black Student Professionals	
Media and Public Awareness of Issues	NBLSA	Will produce four articles in association publication
	NABCJ National Religious Affairs Association	Will provide press releases to denominational news services
		Will publish all reports and findings on NABCJ website
		Will provide one or more articles to NABCJ's newsletter, iThe Commitment
		Distribute hard and electronic copies of the report to task force members and key stakeholders
		Will provide reports from this meeting to the White House, appropriate members of Congress, the Department of Justice and other public officials
	National Urban League	Copies of the proceedings of this session, to include action steps, will be provided to these national bodies by representatives from these groups who serve on the task forces
	National Ten Point Leadership Foundation	
	Secretariat of the Black Catholic Bishops	
	AME Bishops	
	Fed. Bureau of Prisons Chaplains	

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Denominational Efforts	Seventh Day Adventists	Will raise the issue in national meeting of the SDA Church
	National Baptist Convention USA, Inc.	Will ensure discussion in the Virginia Baptist General Conference
		Will ensure discussion in the Connecticut Baptist General Conference
		Will raise in training and other events of the Prison Ministry and Criminal Justice Commission
	National Prison Ministries, Phoenix, Arizona	Will report the nature of these issues to appropriate denominational leaders and strongly request action and resolutions for cooperation on these issues
	National Association of Churches of God	
	Black Nazarene Ministries	
	Full Gospel Baptist Fellowship	Will raise these issues as a component of Outreach Education within appropriate denominational meetings