

WHY ARE WE DOING THIS? A CALL AND RESPONSE



Scholars have documented that the African American church has been an important agency of social control and organization among black Americans. The African American church provided one of the earliest and therefore most recognizable vehicles for black Americans to begin to develop networks of support and control. Yet, despite the historical importance of the African American church as a unique and powerful social institution within the black community, its potential influence for promoting pro-social behavior among black Americans has been largely ignored by criminologists. How can the church be heard?¹

Is there a strange silence from the pulpit on matters relating to crime and justice?

The model of the Carolina Regional Black Church Task Force Initiative on Crime and Criminal Justice bridges urban, rural, and geographic divides to rally and unite the armies of faith, justice, and service, with required stakeholders.

The model is designed to motivate, educate, empower, and build capacity, as needed, for the church to serve this present age by acting upon the spectrum of criminal justice issues most common and threatening to African American communities and constituents.

Why? Because 30 years of change in social and criminal justice policy has resulted in the overuse of imprisonment and the lack of preparation for reentry in the United States.

Why? Because the impact of incarceration has been borne most directly by racial and ethnic minorities. African Americans and Latinos constitute more than three fifths of the nearly two million Americans in prison and jail.

Why? Because it's no longer common or legal for Sis. Lula, the neighborhood watch, to administer sanctions for misbehaving.

Why? Because over 30 years, the focus and priorities of the black church has changed.

Why? Because they would prefer to preach to, teach, and learn from the living as opposed to officiating over the dead and dying.

¹2000. Black Church Outreach: *Comparing How Black and Other Congregations Serve Their Needy Neighbors*. Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society. University of Pennsylvania.

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It was a compelling reason why pastors, on last Saturday, a beautifully sunny morning in Florence, South Carolina, drove, some as far as three hours or more one-way, to attend a meeting to learn more about how to serve the present age. The meeting was so important that Addie Richburg, Chief Domestic Strategist of the National Association of Blacks in Criminal Justice (NABCJ), had ridden all night from Bridgeport, Connecticut, by train to get there. Rev. Warren Dolphus, President of the National Religious Affairs Association (NRAA) of NABCJ had driven to Florence from a prior meeting at Habitat for Humanities in Americus, Georgia.

Clearly motivated by a zeal for service and change, the effort, a by-product of NABCJ's 2000 faith-based initiative, Facilitating Assistance in Transition and Healing (F.A.I.T.H.), cannot be accused of political motivation, but instead, it is an uncommon dedication for an uncommonly needful cause.

Dubbed the Carolina Regional Black Church Task Force Initiative on Crime and Criminal Justice, this was not the first meeting. In December 2003, close to 100 pastors and lay representatives drove to Charlotte, North Carolina, in the midst of an ice storm. In February 2004, they convened again - asking no monies for gasoline or for meals, and instead receiving an offering those who attended to help themselves better organize their efforts. No notepads or pens were furnished. They came with their own paper, some steno pads, and others with embossed portfolios, but all eagerly taking notes while representatives of NRAA and NABCJ set the stage for the church's role in the world of crime and justice in America.

One pastor, who indicated that her church had 27 members, sat by other pastors whose memberships were 20, 40, and 50 times larger.

They watched a video of Rev. Eugene Rivers, a Church of God in Christ pastor and founder of the National Ten Point Leadership Foundation, as he walked the streets of Boston, ministering in his unique way to reduce crime amongst the youth. The bishop, one of the highest ranking officials in church protocol, sat quietly, taking notes, and shaking his head in dismay like all of the other pastors when they viewed the shocking scenes of how a straight "A" black youth, accepted to attend Harvard, was reduced to a vegetative state from a video produced by the U.S. Attorney's office on gun violence.

With 43% of the children in both North and South Carolina living in single-parent homes and over 11% of African American youth between 16-19 in both states becoming high-school dropouts, they sat in awe and responded enthusiastically with questions when a grant manager from the state Department of Education, who was also one of the church representatives, revealed opportunities for the churches to participate in helping low income children and priority schools with their educational mission.

There were no major and minor league distinctions; titles were checked at the door. They were all in place at 9:00am sharp, no matter how far they had to drive to get there or to return home. For almost four hours, they sat, with no breaks or complaints, munching on doughnuts and sipping on juice while raising questions, ideas, and absorbing all of the information provided. Represented by both male and female, several in the group were bi-vocational clergy, one a 15-year police officer; another, an educator. Several pastors of smaller churches had dual identity as career professionals. Whether full or part time preachers, they were driven to serve.

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Observers could have used words like “amazing” to describe the scene and the level of interest at Greater Zion Tabernacle on last Saturday, March 13, 2004. But what was really occurring was the growth of a new movement, one where black churches were responding to the call for social responsiveness for which they have been historically known. In the language of the church, it was a revival of ministry.

Their efforts have been inspired and led by one pastor working in concert with criminal justice officials, to understand how to minimize or rid the selling of crack and sexual favors which begin each day across the street and on his church grounds after the sun goes down.

Deeply moved and responding to a call to action by NABCJ/NRAA, he returned to his church, his ministry’s day care, and to his ministerial colleagues in North and South Carolina with an insistence that they begin to make a more significant and untraditional difference. With his son, his wife, and his daughter-in-law dutifully at his side, Rev. Roger Green, Sr., a Charlotte pastor, wasted no time in taking what he had learned in July 2003 while attending a strategic planning meeting of clergy and criminal justice professionals. In less than four months, he had made calls, and written letters, inviting ministers from all parts of the Carolinas to share his concern.

It had been during the 31st Annual Conference and Training Institute of NABCJ in St. Louis that Rev. Green, his wife, Minister Connie Green, and their son, Roger Green Jr., director of their church daycare, had been invited to join other clergy to launch the National Black Church Task Force Initiative on Crime and Criminal Justice. The effort was supported by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the U.S. Department of Justice, the Faith and Service Technical Education Network of the National Crime Prevention Council, the Corporation for National and Community Service, and even by educational networks such as the College of Lake County in Waukegan, Illinois. Encouraged by Dr. John J. Dilulio, Jr., Director, Frederic Fox Leadership Professor of Politics, Religion and Civil Society, and Rev. Eugene Rivers, the taskforce initiative (the movement) which evolved from F.A.I.T.H. sparked the official marriage of faith and justice for NABCJ with gave birth to a passion for Rev. Green and his family.

In subsequent meetings, clergy will be divided and will appoint representatives to serve on nine workgroups using the National Black Church Task Force Initiative on Crime and Criminal Justice model:

- ◆ Reentry and Mentoring Offenders
- ◆ Violent and Disruptive Youth
- ◆ Disproportionate Minority Confinement, Detention Reform, and Disenfranchisement
- ◆ Restorative Justice and Ministry in Prisons
- ◆ Education, Crime Prevention, and Intervention
- ◆ Mentoring Children of Prisoners

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- ◆ Black Female Offenders
- ◆ Strengthening Marriages and Families
- ◆ Public Education, Training and Civic Participation

In the coming months and for the next several years, faith representatives will receive training and form partnerships with other stakeholders to include federal, state, and local law enforcement, educational and elected officials, health and human service agencies and corrections departments, all in an attempt to maximize the service they provide to their constituents and communities at large.

When it was all said and done for the day, people of faith from black churches in two states had emerged in Florence representing the cities and communities where over 1.1 million (1,158,855⁺²) people live.

Collectively, there are 83 churches currently represented in the North and South Carolina consortium. Other North Carolina cities represented in the group who could not attend this meeting include Raleigh, Winston-Salem, Goldsboro, Greensboro, High Point and Greenville. Participating clergy and most especially Rev. Green, believe that the numbers will continue to grow.

At present, the National Black Church Task Force Initiative model is being replicated in Connecticut; Baltimore, Maryland; Central Florida, and soon to come in Richmond, Virginia. Future plans also include replication in St. Louis, Missouri.

² Estimated population from 2000 census.