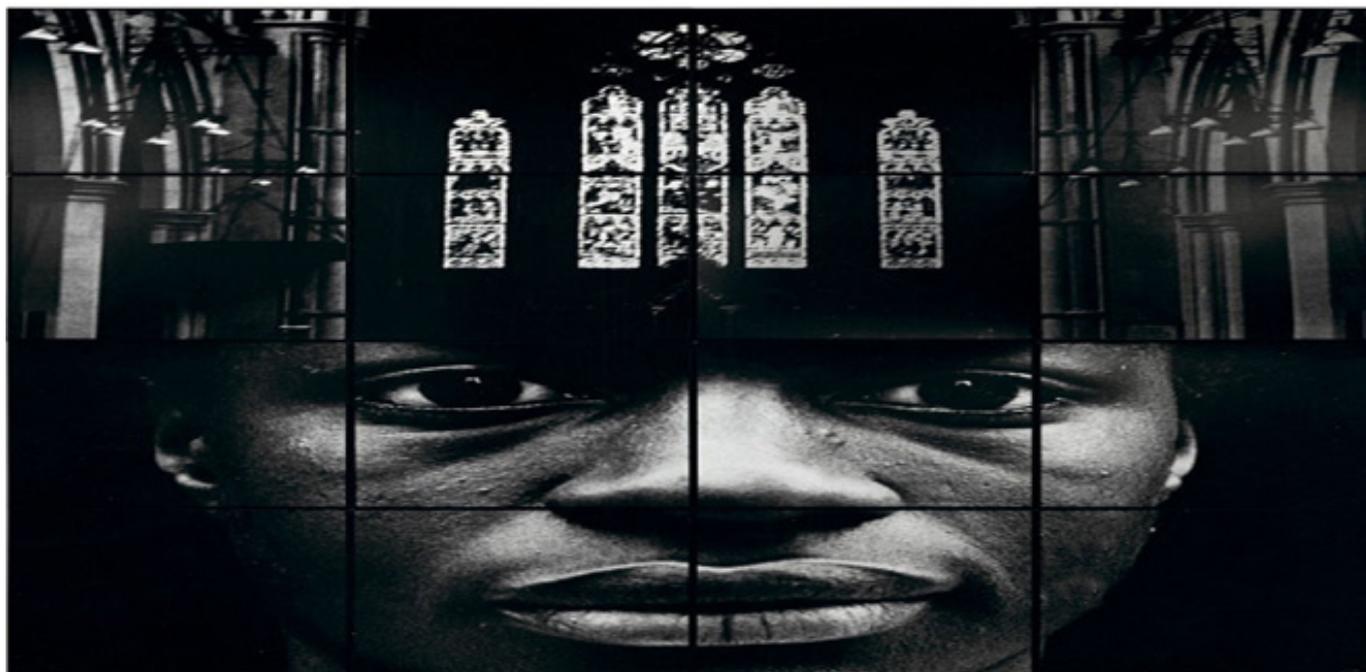


The Role Of The Black Church

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Black Churches, Community and Development

As the church is an integral part of the Black experience, I believe this article by Omar M. McRoberts is timely and informative. It discusses the progressive and changing role of the church and gives us plenty to think about as we move forward in the 21st century and beyond.



When people discuss “faith-based community development,” they often jump directly into a conversation on the special role of faith-based groups, assuming that the meanings of “community” and “development” are well-defined, universally understood and constant. They may even think, given the recent surge of black church participation in the fields of housing and economic development, that faith-based community development is something new.

But if we take into account the changing historical understandings of “community” and “development” among black churches, we see that these institutions have figured prominently in African-American community development for more than two centuries.

There has never existed a homogeneous black community or a universal black church to defend it. Nor has there ever been a universally accepted understanding of “development.” The history of black church-based community development is a history of diverse institutions championing a kaleidoscopic variety of African-American concerns, which themselves have been rooted in broader political, social, and economic contexts that are always shifting.

This essay briefly reviews black churches’ changing definitions of “community” and “development,” and then describes a contemporary mismatch between some of these definitions and popular understandings of “community development.”

This Isn't New

Throughout slavery, blacks formed religious congregations in secret. At that time, the size and composition of black communities were, to a large extent, dictated by the whims of the plantation slave system, and faith-based development meant fighting the great absurdity of slavery with ideas and concrete acts of resistance. It meant, among other things, presenting blacks as full humans, beloved of God and central protagonists in the divine drama of history, not as sub-humans alien to God and godliness. After the civil war, slavery began to lose some of its power over black social organization, and churches became the not-so-secret centers of black community life.

Meanwhile northern blacks openly organized quasi-religious mutual aid societies. During the slave era, “community” referred to populations of precariously free blacks, and development activities promoted cooperative economics, educational advancement, and the abolition of slavery. From these faith-based organizing efforts sprang countless African-American social, economic, and political institutions, including schools, insurance companies, banks, and social service organizations.



In at least one case, a mutual aid society gave birth to a formal church and denomination – the [Free African Society](#), founded in Philadelphia by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones in 1787.

From its inception, the Society prioritized “community development” in the form of abolitionism and solidarity-building among free blacks. In 1794 the Society spawned the [Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church](#), the flagship congregation of this nation’s first

independent African-American denomination. Later, the AME denomination formed the first black publishing house, and its leader, Richard Allen, organized several national anti-slavery "Negro Conventions." Bethel and other northern churches also linked to form stations on the Underground Railroad.

From the late nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century, waves of migration brought millions of rural blacks to cities and southern blacks to the north. In response, much of black religious life was reorganized along class, regional, and theological lines. Churches of middle-class blacks, poor blacks, northern blacks, southern blacks, foreign-born blacks, Pentecostal blacks and "mainline" blacks emerged, each serving a distinct target population.

Likewise, church-based community development grew more diverse because religious people had widely varying responses to issues of the day. For instance, some of the long-standing churches of northern blacks, many of which were middle class and Baptist or Methodist, tried to acclimate recent migrants to northern life through a variety of educational services, including training on how to behave in public settings. Others largely ignored the newcomers, choosing instead to "advance the race" by cultivating their own cultural, intellectual, and economic capacities.

Meanwhile, churches of poor southern migrants – which eventually came to include countless Pentecostal congregations – coordinated travel, found jobs, and provided temporary lodging for newcomers, in addition to offering oases of southern spirituality and sociability. In the same period, the birth of secular black community development entities such as the NAACP and the Urban League provided entirely new outlets for socially concerned religious blacks. These groups would also provide new arenas for ongoing debates over the very meaning of racial community, and the goals of racial advancement.



Community and Neighborhood

In the 1950s and '60s, the "community" in community development became strongly associated with urban neighborhoods, and "development" became associated almost exclusively with economic and social service endeavors. During this period, continued black northward migration and civil rights gains in the housing arena altered the racial and economic makeup of countless residential neighborhoods in major northern cities and led to a national preoccupation with the fate of urban neighborhoods.

Federal poverty policy turned toward neighborhoods with the [Economic Opportunity Act of 1964](#). The EOA, with its "maximum feasible participation" rhetoric and neighborhood-based Community Action Programs, became the centerpiece of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty.

In policy circles, "community" became defined along highly local geographic lines. "Development," which had always included political resistance and policy advocacy in its repertoire of strategies, now focused mainly on social and economic projects. In this national policy environment, all sorts of local organizations, including churches, came to view neighborhood initiative as the most legitimate way to address urban problems. Hundreds of local black institutions became neighborhood-based agents of the state.

Since the '60s, urban poverty rates have ballooned, and government interest in neighborhood-based solutions is still strong, if not stronger. Meanwhile black churches, which once gave birth to countless other institutions, now tend to be the only viable institutions left in depressed black locales. Often they are the only civic spaces where people meet regularly to share experiences, hopes, plans. And popular concern about the deterioration of society's "moral fabric" has reached fever pitch. Together, these circumstances have put tremendous pressure on black churches to play major roles in the resurrection of economically, physically, and sometimes socially devastated neighborhoods.

Today, while the church remains a visible and for the most part staple in the Black community, attitudes have shifted. With the proliferation of the "*prosperity gospel*" and "*MEGA-churches*" cropping up in nearly every community, the role of the the "Black" church has shifted.

Mega churches are multi-million dollar non-profit corporations. Qualifying as a 501(c)(3) Federal Tax Exemption Non-Profit comes at a cost; especially when those funding your social programs are often at odds with the real needs of the congregants.

The last time I checked, **Jesus didn't operate from a 'MEGA' church** [building].

Somehow we seem to have confused "organization" with "*organism*".

What do you think? Chime in and let us know!

[Source](#)