Interfacing African American Churches with Agencies and Institutions: An Expanding Continuum of Care with Partial Answers to Welfare Reform

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It is unrealistic to presume that churches and other private charities can fill the void resulting from welfare reform (Sider,1995; Conniff, 1997); yet there are ways to structure an effective church- and community-based continuum of care that will help to do so. In this article African-American churches are viewed as major players. An explanation of the systems theory of isomorphic replication provides a key to understanding the success of this collaborative model, which addresses issues facing communities while building on their strengths and assets and reckoning with the challenges of working collaboratively. Recurring issues of race, culture, trust, and control are studied in various dimensions of the collaborative process, providing insight that can turn stumbling blocks into a map for creative systemic change.

Mounting evidence that grassroots and faith-based groups are doing a much better job of addressing community issues than government does (Frame, 1997; Schorr, 1988; Shapiro, 1996; Sherman, 1996, Sider, 1995) may explain in part the sudden surge of interest in having such groups pick up the tab for welfare reform. While that is a colossal and impossible task (Sider, 1995; Coniff, 1997), the interface of churches and agencies in a collaborative effort to bring wholeness and well being to families is being

realized on a small scale in Pittsburgh, PA. The African-American church in particular is a formidable resource—the one long term, indigenous institution in the Black community that encounters and embraces individuals, families, and extended families from birth to death in a holistic way.

Families and Youth 2000 is a collaborative of four African American churches, a neighborhood health center, a church-based grassroots community organization, and a counseling and therapy agency whose purpose is to strengthen the well being of families and youth in the East End of Pittsburgh. The agencies in the collaborative provide counseling, therapy, health care, mentoring, life skills, youth leadership education, and training. The church-based services include family and youth recreation, youth development activities, job skills programs, home management training, ministry to single mothers, recovery ministry, data management, the Christian Life Skills Mentoring Program, and tutoring. All services are available to parishioners, unchurched community residents, and those referred from within or outside the collaborative.

The Pittsburgh Pastoral Institute (PPI) convenes a bimonthly case and site conference meeting to assure maximum effectiveness in services provided to participating residents and other referrals. While confidentiality is protected, cases benefit from the sharing and review provided by group input by professional therapists and community lay people from all of the collaborating sites. Christian Life Skills (CLS) serves as coordinating agency for the collaborative, assuring general information sharing and the maximization of coordinated and collaborative efforts in keeping with the overall mission.

Pittsburgh's East End community is approximately 80% African American. *Black and White Economic Conditions*, a 1995 Benchmark Report published by the University of Pittsburgh, indicates that among 50 large U.S. cities Pittsburgh has the highest percentage of black males age 25–54 not in the labor force (30.9%); the second highest percentage of black children in poverty (56.7%); the highest poverty rate for blacks age 18–64 (35.2%); and the largest disparity in labor force participation between black and white males age 25–54 (18%). In summary the report states that " . . . Pittsburgh has one of the poorest, most economically disadvantaged populations of any large city in the U.S."

(p. 5) The East End is clearly representative of these conditions. Teen pregnancy, out-of-wedlock births, and poor academic performance are also issues in these communities. Although some churches, local public school parent organizations, and a variety of other community groups had independently implemented grassroots programs and activities to strengthen and improve the quality of life from within the communities, Families and Youth 2000 is the first sustained effort on the part of community agencies and churches to maximize through collaboration their capacities in exerting a positive impact on the community over time.

Families and Youth 2000: Origins

In 1990 the directors of two white agencies began to acknowledge limitations in comprehensive health care services for the growing African-American population in the community. They invited the director of CLS to discuss this concern because of her involvement with a network of African-American churches. This was the beginning of the vision for Families and Youth 2000.

Discovering the Pattern of Isomorphisms

In the seven years since the dialogue began, some patterns have emerged that are worthy of close study for what they can teach us about our interrelatedness as human beings, recursive patterns of co-evolution, and other behaviors tied to a concept of isomorphic replication of context. Hofstadter (1979, p. 49) indicates that the term *isomorphic* applies when "two complex structures can be mapped on to each other, in such a way that to each part of one structure there is a corresponding part in the other structure; 'corresponding' means that the two parts play similar roles in their respective structures."

Recurring patterns are replicated in a variety of domains as distinct, as Hofstadter (1979, p. 49) points out, as art, music, and mathematics, for example. Tracking reciprocal and recursive relationships of various domains or systems is a means of utilizing the principle of isomorphism. "Parallel process phenomenon occurs and recurs in a remarkable multiplicity of forms" (Doehrman, 1976, p. 82).

From the inception of the collaborative, this pattern has been at work and observable. Early on issues of culture, control, race, and trust emerged in the group. Those issues continue to have a

major impact. They have been manifested in a variety of settings and in a variety of ways. We have recognized that these issues reside within us, as individuals, within each of the seven sites of the collaborative, and within the collaborative as a whole. The same issues have emerged repeatedly as the collaborative and its members have interacted with groups and institutions outside the collaborative. These issues play a major role in shaping public policy, congressional decisions, and world issues.

Early Stage in the Life of Families and Youth 2000

When PPI and East Liberty Family Health Care Center (ELFHCC) recognized the existence of cultural and racial barriers, they knew they needed an alternative approach to service delivery. Issues of access, financial resources, communication, values, and beliefs created major barriers to the delivery of comprehensive services.

These barriers were addressed by identifying the churches as an asset within the community that—because of their values and beliefs regarding well being—could serve as a mediating structure to enhance access and communication between the health facilities and the community. The preexistence of a network of churches associated with Christian Life Skills was an additional asset that further facilitated the remediation of the barriers and difficulties. By working together, the churches could have an impact on a significant segment of the community. They could also advise and assist the health agencies in understanding and negotiating racial and cultural barriers.

Trust and Control in Collaborative Membership/Participation

Issues of trust and control emerged when the director of CLS recommended that representatives of the churches be invited to join the group in creating the design that would become Families and Youth 2000. The resistance by the leadership of the two white agencies persisted for more than a year. At the same time personal relationships were growing, and trust was building among representatives of the churches within the Christian Life Skills network. Later, when letters were sent to numerous churches inviting them to participate in the collaborative, the churches already involved in CLS exhibited the strongest and most immediate response.

Race, Culture, Trust and Control in Selecting Evaluators

These issues emerged as key issues again when it was neces-
sary to select an evaluator for the project. There was skepticism
on the part of the African Americans in the collaborative as to
whether the university evaluators would collect data for their
own benefit, misinterpret the nuances of the African American
religious experiences expressed in the context of the project, and
fail to truly assist and advance the purposes inherent in the col-
laborative. This was addressed by hiring non-white evaluators
with significant cross-cultural backgrounds and sensitivity to the
culture of the church.

Mid-Stage in the Life of the Collaborative

Trust and Control in Employment Policies

At this point in the life of the collaborative employees at
two of the sites challenged employment decisions involving the
Director of CLS, who had a leadership role not only within her
participating congregation but also as Director of the Families
and Youth 2000 Collaborative. While it was recognized that she
had been a leading force in bringing the collaborative together,
some individuals now believed that she had too much influence
and control.

The former members of the congregations who had been part
of the initial CLS networking had been replaced by new per-
sons who did not have the history of the relationship and trust
building. These concerns led to the following decisions: (1) the
collaborative would participate in team building and conflict res-
olution training with an outside facilitator, and (2) the collabora-
tive would begin to develop a strong formalized infrastructure by
compiling a booklet describing the history and vision of Families
and Youth 2000 and a policy and procedures manual to govern
its work.

Racial and Cultural Issues Within the Collaborative

Aspects of the employment concerns referred to above were
perceived to be related to systemic racism that severely impacts
economics and gender issues in African-American communities
(Bangs & Hong; Nobles, 1989), and ultimately their families.

Members of the collaborative came to recognize that their reason for coming together (to holistically enhance the well being of African-American families and youth) would not exempt them from encountering within the collaborative the very issues they were fighting to rectify on a larger systemic level. That is, just as racism, economics, and gender have an impact at the societal level, this is also true at the level of the collaborative. This is an example of a phenomenon in two different domains where a pattern is replicated.

Trust, Control, and Culture in Engaging Systems Beyond the Collaborative—University Systems and Family Systems

University Systems—While the collaborative was struggling internally to address issues of race and control, the Families and Youth 2000 project manager had initiated discussion with the University of Pittsburgh regarding a course that he wanted to teach at the University as an adjunct faculty member. For an out-sider to approach the university and offer a course was unheard of. Furthermore, the proposed course was an interdisciplinary course requiring cooperation across several academic areas. The course, "Building Interdisciplinary Partnerships: A Team Based Approach to Community Services," was introduced at a luncheon for deans, department heads, and others as a means of moving issues of collaboration from practice at the community level to training at the university level.

After the presentation there were many questions,and though there was some skepticism and some criticism, there was also enough interest to move the idea forward. It took three years to institute the course, given the culture of the university. The intent of the course, which is offered at the Graduate School of Public Health, is to provide a multidisciplinary training for graduate students in order to assure their capacity to work co-operatively with other service providers across disciplines and to work with sensitivity, respect, and understanding in the context of the community. The project manager had to adjust to the cultural environment of the university and all of its internal systems in order to succeed.

Family Systems—At the community level, trained volunteers from Bethany Baptist Church in Homewood initially met with some skepticism when they approached families in the neighborhood. The invitation to participate in a year-round program after receiving Christmas gifts from the local Project Angel Tree (a program for families of incarcerated men) made residents wonder if the church volunteers were yet another wave of social service providers intruding into their personal business. With time, however, it became clear that these volunteers did not carry the bureaucratic baggage the residents often encountered with other providers. They truly cared about people, listened, respected them, and brought a refreshing added dimension to their interaction—prayer and a relationship with Christ. This approach to community enhancement through church-based natural helpers has brought new hope to families and the community.

The Current Stage of Life with the Collaborative

As the churches, natural helpers, professionals, students, and the various other collaborative members reach out to each other and to those beyond themselves, there is hope that the collaborative will be an ever-widening circle of advocacy, support, and enhancement in the many facets of community life that are essential to well being. A strategic plan for deliberate asset building has great potential for an exponentially large return in enhancing community life at every level. This expanding continuum of care can be mutually enhancing for all systems involved. Here are some current examples of its impact.

Trust/Control/Cultural Issues in Enhancing Academic Institutions

Intern Placements—University interns are now being placed in nontraditional settings such as churches in the African American community and the coordinating office of the grassroots church-based network—Christian Life Skills. They strengthen the efforts of the churches while gaining experience in counseling, community planning, program and curriculum development, as well as cross-cultural and interdisciplinary collaboration.

University in the community—Classes and individual students are visiting the neighborhoods to learn from community leaders,

natural helpers, and other lay people about the expertise they have in working for community enhancement.

Community in the University—Practioners from the community are being invited to lecture at university sponsored conferences and courses in order to provide timely input on how to interface effectively with the realities of community life.

Race/Trust/Culture/ Control Issues in Enhancing Community Health

Coordination of Church-Based Community Health Initiative— History documents the misdiagnosis and the misuse of medication and experimentation among African Americans and other people of color in the United States. To avoid the perpetuation of racism and disregard for cultural variables, hospitals in the vicinity are recognizing the potential coordinating role of Families and Youth 2000 in facilitating access and more effective service to underserved residents of the community. By addressing racial, cultural, and trust issues traditionally encountered in health care settings, the collaborative is playing a unique role in traversing culturally diverse systems to enhance the health of the community. Partly as a result of this effort, some health care services will be provided in local schools, churches, and a community center.

MUI/Seminary Training, Internships, and Modeling—A Mutually Beneficial Relationship— A linkage with the Metro Urban Institute of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary has provided training opportunities for lay leaders in the churches and field placements for seminary interns who assist with efforts in the congregations and community. The Metro Urban Institute (MUI) of the seminary has become a place where urban church leaders can share ideas, issues, and efforts, and build church-based collaboratives to enhance their community outreach. Families and Youth 2000 is seen as a model from which other groups of churches can learn how to develop collaboratives that provide comprehensive community-based care.

Faith /Health Consortium— In addition, the linkage with MUI led to a reaffirmation of a joint program between the seminary and the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh. This in turn has led to the convening of a Faith/Health Consortium, which is now in conversation with the Carter Center in Atlanta (Emory University) and its Interfaith Health Program.

One of the strengths of this new thrust is that it validates what many in the African American church and community have always embraced as a life style—the integration of spiritual orientation with every dimension of one's being. The added voices of this nationally recognized center and the local institutions of higher learning affirm a strong and significant asset that the evaluators are still trying to discover how to assess—spirituality.

While spirituality has been at the heart of the collaborative (which describes itself as Christ-centered) since its inception, conversations around how to effectively evaluate that dimension are still in process. Again the mix of divergent cultures raises new questions about praxis. A number of persons within and outside the collaborative have observed that spirituality may not be easily measurable, but people who experience the positive changes it brings into their lives know it exists (Fitzgerald, 1996; Larson, 1992; Shapiro, 1996).

The pastors of the churches participating in Families and Youth 2000 have expressed great enthusiasm about the Faith/ Health Consortium and other health partnerships with hospitals and health centers. They have already agreed to work together to bring wholeness—which includes spiritual well being—to individuals, families, and communities.

A Theological Framework for Health and Other Policies— As the churches interface with the health community, the theological framework from which they operate has emerged as a guiding light in developing the overall policies and procedures for the collaborative. This recognition emerged when the collaborative was considering a partnership with a local group to provide an alternate site in a pregnancy prevention project. The collaborative, with its pastoral leaders, reached consensus that Families and Youth 2000 would advocate abstinence outside of marriage in addressing issues of sexuality. The partnering agency was pleased with this church-based complementary opportunity for a more whole-person approach to sexuality and general health care.

In this instance, while the cultures of the two delivery systems are very different, there is an acceptance of the cultural distinction, a recognition of the validity of the contribution that can be made in the particular cultural context, and a trust and respect for the

decision makers who are in control of the policies and procedures that guide the church.

Race/Trust/Culture and Control in Enhancing Overall Community Well Being and Promoting a Shift in Public Policy

Reaching Out

Families and Youth 2000 members have chosen to come together for ecumenical worship as a way of celebrating their experience in community with each other and with Christ. They have followed this occasion with a reception where additional information sharing, recruitment of volunteers, and exposure to the various resources and services available through the collaborative are presented. Conducted as a semi-annual event, this is the collaborative's deliberate attempt to embrace more participants in understanding, owning, and participating in the efforts of Families and Youth 2000.

As word of the collaborative spreads through deliberate ongoing contact with community groups beyond it, linkages with the collaborative have resulted in a smorgasbord of services to unchurched as well as churched families and youth. As we engage groups with cultures different from our own, we are able to recognize cultural patterns and boundaries that must be respected in how we engage each other. We must recognize issues related to locus of control, race, and trust. Some of these issues emerge and are dealt with best over time.

Leveraging Access and Resources

As Families and Youth 2000 works toward a better quality of life for families and youth, systemic change becomes a necessary aspect of the process. The collaborative attempts to leverage influence for greater access to and improvement of recreational facilities in the community so youth will have an alternative to gang behavior and violence. It also hopes to leverage more job opportunities for youth and adults. After studying the efforts of faith-based groups such as Families and Youth 2000, there has been a shift in recent public policies at the county level, where faith-based groups are now invited to apply for funding not previously

accessible to them. Families and Youth 2000 just received its first grant from Allegheny County.

Across the country there is a growing movement wherein religious faith is accepted as an aspect of culture that should not necessarily preclude access to public funds for community-based initiatives (Frame, 1997; Sherman, 1996).

Key Factors for Effective Interaction of Divergent Systems

The connecting of different systems (e.g., government and religious groups), in order to make possible an expanding continuum of care, can be mutually enhancing for all systems involved. In addressing patterns—such as culture, race, trust, and control—common to these divergent systems, several key factors transcend the differences and make possible effective interaction. The factors include time, good communication, relationship building, and mutual respect. Such ingredients can create a wholesome context where conflict resolution and problem solving can occur. Further, documenting agreed upon solutions and guidelines for how systems interact can also facilitate the process.

In the book *Collaboration: What Makes it Work* (Mattessich, 1992), the writer outlines the necessary ingredients for an effective collaborative effort. However, beyond these ingredients, if participants are oblivious to the recurring patterns in the various systems that interact, they may overlook commonalities that impact upon them regularly.

Good communication, relationship building, mutual respect, and time, are process oriented in contrast to society's tendency to emphasize products rather than process. African culture and Biblical thought—two grounding elements in the Families and Youth 2000 collaborative—emphasize process over products and ends. That is to say, *how* we treat one another is much more important than the selfish pursuit of money, prizes, control, or power for selfish gain. The collaborative remains grounded in its central focus and purpose through periods of prayer and reflection in the context of most collaborative meetings. For Families and Youth 2000, time, good communication, respect, relationship building, written guidelines, shared times of prayer, and reflection all strengthen the collaborative and keep it vibrant.

Our Mode/Process of Interaction is a Choice

Across our country, in large systems and small, we repeatedly encounter issues of race, culture, trust, and control. These issues can be ignored or addressed incompetently. On the other hand, it is possible to recognize the replication of isomorphisms in the various systems where we interact and deliberately encounter them through life-giving rather than oppressive processes. A collaborative comprised of all key players—recipients of services as well as service providers—will more effectively address issues of race, culture, trust, and control.

The collaborative needs to reflect, in its continuum of players/ decision-makers, the continuum of services it intends to provide. Families and Youth 2000 has discovered that at varying points in the process recipients and providers change roles, and there is great mutuality to the work of the collaborative.

In the face of welfare reform and the dismantling of federally funded social services, which will be devastating for many, we must recognize our capacity as community groups to alleviate rather than exacerbate the problem. We do violence to one another, and our children do likewise, because violence is committed in multiple layers in interacting systems of our nation—in congress, board rooms, institutions of higher learning, and later in families, communities, and the media. These are isomorphic replications of unhealthy processes for addressing issues of race, culture, trust, and control. We need to shift from violent ways of interacting to life-giving processes of interaction.

The racial disparities in Pittsburgh (Bangs & Hong 1995), manifested in the worst employment and economic standings of African American males among 50 large U.S. cities, are consistent with another study indicating that the majority of African Americans feel the U.S. economic and legal systems are unfair to blacks (Tapia, 1996). These racial and resultingly economic and legal (control) barriers have a devastating impact on the African American family (Edelman, 1987). It is important to note that in highlighting gender, Bangs and Hong (1995) point to a major issue of power and control in this society. Note also the works of Billingsley (1992), Kunjufu (1995), Madhubuti (1990), McGhee (1984), Nobles (1989), and Stewart (1978).

When historically many social scientists and mental health professionals have had a hostile attitude toward religion as a factor in well being (Fagan, 1996; Larson, 1992), it is understandable that many in the religious community would be reluctant to trust systems associated with such professions.

Conclusion

Racism, ungrounded cultural biases, mistrust, and power/control hunger will prevent or destroy effective collaboration needed to maximize the resources in our communities.

Reckoning with Racism

The reality of racism in general, as well as systemic racism, must be acknowledged with all of its economic, educational, medical, legal, gender, and other sociological implications. Systems interacting with churches and other community-based groups must be prepared to reckon with the recesses of racism.

Reckoning with Trust and Control

When issues of control emerge, questions of shared control, shifts in locus of control, and the history of how and why the present locus of control has evolved must be raised. Those who are accustomed to being in positions of privilege and control—large institutions and the economically advantaged—must contend with the necessity of changing historical patterns. When trust is a concern, history, cultural context, and the possibility of introducing a new paradigm need to be considered.

Reckoning with Cultural Issues

The power of culture cannot be taken for granted. To ignore the natural boundaries that define the culture of any system, or the characteristics integral to that system, is to invite unnecessary confusion in attempting to interact across systems.

Reckoning with Changes in our Systems

As public funds become more limited, local collaboratives must earn the trust of the groups with which they interact by demonstrating respect for issues of race, culture, trust, and control. Federal government is shifting more control to the states.

County and city groups must entrust control of the dollars to neighborhoods and communities in ways that empower the disenfranchised rather than in ways that inflict more violence. This means an integrated effort that includes all participating sectors of a given community. Working at asset mapping can enhance such a process of assuring the participation of churches, groups of churches, natural helpers, and other residents in ways that enhance, empower, and equip people to take full control of their lives.

Involving Everyone in Taking Responsibility

Issues of race, trust, culture, and control are part of a recurring pattern. Constructive, respectful processes for addressing our interconnectedness as human beings, our interrelatedness, and recursive behavior patterns can liberate and strengthen our existence in community with one another and create an expanding continuum of care that enhances the well being of all involved. While in the African-American community the church may play a key role, every system, every group, at every level, shares in this responsibility since the patterns are evident throughout.

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