# Parallels and Convergence of Social Engagement by Social Workers and the African American Church

## Gregory E. Perkins[1] & Terri Moore Brown[2]

## Abstract

As the United States redefines its policies and priorities as a welfare state, current efforts presents many opportunities for organizations and professional associations that have roots in social movements from a historical perspective to once again, turn their focus to those similar causes of confronted at the inception of their origins. This article reviews and parallels historical contexts that has been identified as germane to the origins of the social work profession as advocates for change in social policies, social work and spirituality and the essence of how these struggles for equality coincide with social reforms sought by congregates of African American Churches.

**Keywords:** African-American church, religion, clergy, social workers,spirituality, church, ministry, congregation

## Introduction

As the United States redefines its policies and priorities as a welfare state, current efforts presents many opportunities for organizations and professional associations that have roots in social movements from a historical perspective to once again, turn their focus to those similar causes of confronted at the inception of their origins.

[1] Ed.D., MSW, ACSW, LAPSW, Assistant Professor and Assistant Chair.
Email: gperkins@uncfsu.edu, Phone: (910) 672-1021
[2] Ed.D., MSW, Professor and Chair, FayettevilleStateUniversity, Department of Social Work, 1200 Murchison Road, Fayetteville, NC 28301-4298.
Email: tmbrown@uncfsu.edu, Phone: 910-672-1853

This article reviews and parallels historical contexts that has been identified as germane to the origins of the social work profession as advocates for change in social policies, social work and spirituality and the essence of how these struggles for equality coincide with social reforms sought by congregates of African American Churches.  We will discuss theirimpactin shaping social policies relating to the vulnerable, disadvantaged, and those experiencing discrimination.  Our intention is to provoke a sense of urgency for a return to the movements that ignited their engagement of the social welfare state and to scholarly contribute to and advance, as suggested in the literature, an awareness of the resilient nature and advocacy skill set of the Black Church relating to social reform.

**Social Policies and Social Work**

It may be practical to begin with an operational definition of social welfare. Jansson (2012) defines this "*as an organized and societal response to the needs and rights of residents*" (p.6).  The social work profession has a lengthy legacy of being engaged in social issues.  Pioneers have focused efforts towards advocacy on behalf of those with the greatest needs. Poverty, children, families, unemployment and addressing discrimination in some respects are the hallmark of social work (Murdach, 2010). Most notable for social workers particularly is the work of Jane Addams in her fight to mitigate conditions that exist in Chicago that led to the establishment of the Hull House in 1889.

Social policies have specific purposes in the welfare state in addressing categorical issues such as meeting needs, providing regulation, creating or enhancing opportunity, providing funding for health and medical services, education, civil rights, ensuring equality, and in developing infrastructure and economic development (Jansson, 2012).  Ameliorative reforms are what Addams sought and according to Jansson (2012), the Hull House provided the impetus that perpetuated an era in this country's history leader by reformers that challenged the precepts of the politics of social welfare state and its policies.

Social workers through social work education and practice experiences, assimilate to issues that are particularly harmful to those with greatest need.

Agents of social change whether progressive or liberal in their efforts as Murdach (2010) would suggest can be effect advocates and particularly those social workers with special interest in changing paradigms such those working with African Americans (Gilbert, Harvey & Belgrave, 2009) or advancing spirituality as a relational by-product of social interventions (Scales & Kelly, 2011).

The reality is that virtually all social issues or problems have some value attach to it and it is through that particular generalized framework of values that life for those involve evolve (Lens, 2005).  It is particularly noteworthy  however, that the development of future social policies may best be applicable as remedy to ill effects of social inequalities when people area viewed as more than just individuals wanting government assistance.  Individual and organization success may have outcomes that are more favorable in the social reform movement when the concept of social capital is considered. Tymon and Stumpf (2003) have suggested that this whole idea of social capital from a human capital perspective is not fully realized until there is an understanding that the accumulated resources that an individual has access to that is based on relationships can be utilized as leverage towards meeting identified needs. "Relationships", states Tymon and Stumpf (2003) "provide a source of energy that people use to control their external lives" (p.13). For example, as many individuals cope with lack of employment opportunities, competencies and capabilities of potential workers could replace stigma, discrimination and other methods of subjectivity in hiring practices as employers seek the highest quality human talent they can afford (Tymon & Stumpf, 2003).

Spirituality

We have previously discussed from a histological perspective some of the early pioneers in the social reform movement in this country.  It should be noted that many of the efforts to ensure that social policies of the social welfare state were championed by individuals and organizations with moral and ethical values resulting from spiritual or faith-based systems of belief.  There is some evidence supporting spirituality as an empowerment resource with a positive impact on employee work performance (Trott, 1996).Many social workers across the spectrum of social work practice have enjoined their person spiritual beliefs or recognized that importance, from a multicultural and diversity perspective as an active component of offering assistance and advocating for those with unmet needs from the social welfare state.

The Charity Organization Society (COS) and the settlement house movement demonstrate the significance of religious or faith-based individuals and organizations and their use of their Christian beliefs in their practices (Scales & Kelly, 2011).  One of the values spirituality may lend to the undertakings of social reform is the precept of ethical responsibility (Justice & Garland, 2010).  As Levy (2011) noted, this may also create conflicts as well in particular when issues of morality and civic responsibility arises.

Notwithstanding these potential conflicts, most helping professions and in particular social worker have garnered an increased awareness as to the potential value of faith on professional practice because of its implied relations to the professional core social work values that include do more hurt and the client's right to self-determination (Furman, Benson & Canda, 2011). Previous review of the literature also found very favorable relationships between social workers and the clergy in general. For example, there is evidence that social workers and other counselors collaborate with clergy to address psychological needs of congregants and social problems (Franklin & Fong, 2011; Close, 2010).

Recognizing the importance of spirituality and the role of clergy, Chalfant, Heller, Roberts, Briones, Aquirre-Hochbaum, & Fan (1990) assert that there are a number of theological education programs that train clergy in counseling and further suggeststhat there isempirical evidence confirmingtheir demandas a source for coping with psychological stress and personal problems (Aholou, Gale, & Slater, 2011; Gartner 2010). This corroborates what researchers have asserted in that there is a positive association between spirituality and the reduction of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and risky behaviors (Canda & Furman, 2010; Koenig, 2007; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Miller, 1999; Miller & Thoreson, 2003; Pargament, 2007; Richards & Bergin, 2005; Sperry & Shafranske, 2005).*The Church's Leader's Counseling Resource Book: A Guide to Mental Health and Social Problems*, co-edited by Franklin and Fong (2011) where chapter authors present case studies, resources and provide evidence based interventions that align with scriptural and ministry approaches for church leaders further supports clergy's importance.

**African-American Churches**

The role of the African-American or Black Church and its impact on their communities is unquestionable.

Numerous bodies of literature substantiate the significance of the church as an influential mecca in shaping the social and political landscape of this country pitting it squarely as a pivotal instrument of social reform. As McCray, Grant, and Beachum (2010) state, "Historically, the Black Church has been an institutional stronghold in the Black community as has thereby sustained a cultural ethos that has enabled African Americans to combat racial prejudice and hostility for generations (p.233).

The Black church and the profession of social work as previously chronicled as agents of social change have increditable human social capital resources to advance the causes of poverty, social injustices, discrimination, civil liberties and the needs of the vulnerable.

In some communities, particularly rural and improvised neighborhoods, the church has come to be the only institution that members trust and can rely on to ensure and promote their core values (Torrence, Phillips, & Guidry, 2005). The church has assumed numerous roles. These include that of providing religious education, spiritual formation, shelter from the oppression of the broader society, and as a launching based for political activist among others. Throughout its history, the church helps community members without regard as to church membership and has the highest level of public and private religiousness (Molock, Matlin, Barksdale, Puri & Lyles, 2008). Several researchers have looked to the church as a prominent asset in promoting health education and the prevention of some of the serious health concerns (Robnett & Bany, 2011; Molock et al, 2008; Miller, 2007; Torrence et al, 2005).

Research further indicates that proportionately to that of whites, the black church has shown to be a formidable force in mobilizing congregates in the political area as reformers for social justice. In a study by Robnett & Bany (2011), it has been noted that while church participation uncovered inconclusive results relating to the overall positive effects of the black church involvement on civic engagement, there was statistical significance form a historical perspective of increases in voter participation particularly among women where 58% of the black vote was cast by women. This study also depicts a continuous upward spiral for the black church as it continues to excel as a springboard for largely the black middle-class in exposure to the political messages that stimulated their engagement in the reformation process (Robnett & Bany, 2011).

These efforts have provided the impetus for engagement in activities to reduce health disparities particularly in rural communities to underserved populations (Torrence, Phillips & Guidry, (2005).

Samuel D. Proctor and Gardner C. Taylor are two African-American church leaders commonly known to the modern trained pastors on the importance of diversity, liberation and the political realities through their joint authorship of the book *We Have This Ministry* (1996).

The objectivities of faith and works as expressed by Brown & Brown (2003) demonstrates a shift in the pendulum from side-line to front-line activism for African-Americans due in no small part to the realization of church-based social capital resources.  Contextually for the church, black church leaders have worked towards enhancing communicating skills, better educating their congregates and improving their skills and competences that will ultimately lead to their engagement in lobbying efforts to ignite changes in unfavorable legislation, marches to demonstrate solidarity against social injustices and increased involvement in political campaigns.

Jane Addams and the reformers of the early 20th century were untiring in their efforts to bring about change in the political landscape of this country.  Residual effects of this birthing social movement provided a shared vision of how the social welfare state should direct its efforts to providing for its people.  Raising awareness to social injustices, discrimination, poverty and the advocacy for those most vulnerable were and remain worthy causes. Contextually, African-American congregates are a collective force and have demonstrated effectiveness in their contributions to reforming the course of the social welfare state.

## References

Brown, R. K., & Brown, R. E. (2003).  Faith and works: Church-based social capital resources and African American political activism.  Social Forces, 82(2), 617-641.

Canda, E. R., & Furman, L. D. (2010).Spiritual diversity in social work practice: The heart of helping.  New York: Oxford University Press.

Chalfant, H. P., Heller, P.L., Roberts, A., Briones, D. Aquirre-Hochbaum, S., & Fan, W. (1990).  The clergy as a resource for those encountering psychological distress. Review of Religious Research, 31(3), 305-313.

Close, R. E. (2010).  Ethical considerations in counselor-clergy collaboration.  Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health, 12(4), 242-254.

Furman, L. D., Benson, P. W., & Canda, E. R. (2011).  Christian social workers' attitudes on the role of religion and spirituality in U. S. social work practice and education: 1997-2008.  Social Work and Christianity, 38(2), 175-200.

Gartner, S. (2010).  Staying a pastor while talking like a psychologist: A proposal for an integrative model.  Christian Bioethics Non-Ecumenical Studies of Medical Morality, 16(1), 48-60.

Gilbert, D., Harvey, A., &Belgrave, F. (2009).  Advancing the Afrocentric paradigm:  Building toward evidence-based Afrocentric interventions in social work practice with African Americans.  Social Work 54 (3) p243-250.

Jansson, B., (2012).  The reluctant welfare state: Engaging history to advocate social work practice in contemporary society (7th ed.).  Belmont, CA:Brooks/Cole.

Justice, J. A., & Garland, D. R. (2010).  Dual relationships in congregational practice: Ethical guidelines for congregational social workers and pastors.  Social Work and Christianity, 37(4), 437-445.

Koenig, H. G. (2007).  Spirituality in patient care: Why, how, when, and what. Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press.

Koenig, H. G., McCullough, M. E., & Larson, D. B. (2001).  Handbook of religion and health.  New York: Oxford University Press.

Lens, V. (2005).  Advocacy and argumentation in the public arena: A guide for social workers. Social Work, 50(3), 231-8.

McCray, C. R., Grant, C. M., & Beachum, F. D. (2010).  Pedagogy of self-development: The role the black church can have on African American students.  The Journal of Negro Education, 79(3), 233-248,438-439.

Miller,R. L., Jr. (2007).  Legacy denied: African American gay men, AIDS, and the black church.  Social Work, 52(1), 51-61.

Miller, W. R. (Ed.).  (1999). Integrating spirituality into treatment: Resources for practitioners. Washington: American Psychological Association.

Miller W. R., & Thoreson, C. E. (2003).  Spirituality, religion, and health: An emerging research field.  American Psychologist, 58(1), 24-35.

Molock, S. D., Matlin, S., Barksdale, C., Puri, R., & Lyles, J. (2008). Developing suicide prevention programs for African American youth in African American churches. Suicide & Life – Threatening Behavior, 38(3), 323-33.

Murdach, A. D. (2010). Does American social work have a progressive tradition?Social Work, 55(1), 82-89.

Pargament, K. I. (2007).  Spiritually integrated psychotherapy: Understanding and addressing the sacred.New York: Guildford Press.

Proctor, S. & Taylor, G. (1996).  We have this ministry.  Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press

Richards, P. S., & Bergin, A. E. (Eds.).  (2005). A spiritual strategy for counseling and psychotherapy (2nd ed.).  Washington: American Psychological Association.

Robnett, B., & Bany, J. A. (2011).  Gender, church involvement, and African-American political participation. Sociological Perspectives, 54(4), 689-712.

Scales, T. L., & Kelly, M. S. (2011).  "To give Christ to the neighborhood": A corrective look at the settlement movement and early Christian social workers.  Social Work and Christianity, 38(3), 356-376.

Sperry L., & Shafranske, E. P. (2005).  Spiritually oriented psychotherapy.  Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Torrence, W. A., Phillips, D. S., & Guidry, J. J. (2005).  The assessment of rural African-American churches' capacity to promote health prevention activities. American Journal of Health Education, 36(3), 161-164.

Trott, D. C. III.  (1996).Spiritual well-being of workers: An exploratory study of spirituality in the work place (Unpublished doctoral dissertation).  University of Texas at Austin.

Tymon, W. G., & Stumpf, S. A. (2003).  Social capital in the success of knowledge workers. Career DevelopmentInternational, 8(1), 12-20.