African American Church Social Entrepreneurship as Macro Social Work

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Abstract

As does the profession of Social Work, the African American church has a long history of taking active roles in helping communities in times of social change. Given this commonality and because the African American church has repeatedly demonstrated what could reasonably be considered successful macro social work, it is believed that social workers would benefit from being informed about African American church community involvement from a macro social work perspective. The concept is explored through a discussion of African American Church Social Entrepreneurship as a macro social work response to African American community gentrification.

Keywords: African American, church, Social Work, gentrification

1. Introduction

Communities change constantly. Changes occur almost daily and the cumulative effect can be quite large even when individual changes may seem inconsequential. It is mundane, yet the effects of changes in one's community can significantly affect one's mental health, financial wellbeing, physical safety, and quality of life. When people think about community change, it is usually large-scale changes that first come to mind rather than the myriad of small changes that fill a community's everyday life. New shopping centers, rapid building on one particular block, the demolition of an old factory, a shift in an area's ethnic or racial composition, a park renovation or a road expansion are all large-scale community changes. However, change also occurs on a smaller scale, such as the movement of a single family to a community, the sale of a home, or minor alterations to the physical landscape. Large-scale changes are generally more noticeable to both residents and outside observers, but small-scale changes are most noticeable to the people whose lives are touched by them. Small-scale changes over time can accumulate into a large-scale change, but their effects can be felt throughout the process. One phenomena influencing both large-scale and small-scale community change is that of gentrification.

Community change of any nature is of interest to the social work profession. At the micro-level social workers are seeking to help individuals and families (Hepworth, 2006) through counseling and case management (Poulin, 2005). Macro social work serves as the change agent in addressing social problems (Hepworth, 2006). Barker (2004) indicates that the focus of macro practice is social change through community interventions and that the African American church (AAC) has a long history of social change through macro practice. Given this and that the ways social services are delivered by social workers has changed over time (Fukey, Balasubramanian & Jaykumar; Cameron, Bostock & Coomber, 2014), it could be suggested that the AAC has had a successful history in macro social work practice and should therefore be of interest to the social work profession as it seeks to address the ever-constant changes effecting the social work delivery system at the macro level.

Franklin (1997) suggests that the AAC engages in five levels of service to the community. The first level is basic charity that provides direct relief to the homeless, hurting, and hungry. The second provides sustained support to assist people in finding employment.

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The third is social service delivery that provides job training, literacy skills, and care for children and the elderly. The fourth level is political advocacy for the needs of the disadvantaged. The fifth level is comprehensive community development which involves housing construction, small business development, and large retail or franchise endeavors. While some observers are concerned that the church may be moving away from its historical concern for the poor, there continue to be opportunities for the church to assist those in their communities. One such current opportunity is African American church Social Entrepreneurship as a historically consistent social change community intervention as a macro response to African American community gentrification.

A dramatic illustration of gentrification on a large scale is that of what has happened to the Gullah. Douglas (2017) relates that the Gullah communities, descendants of West African slaves, prospered in the islands around Hilton Head, SC where the Gullah were once the main inhabitants. However, development came to the island during the 1950's displacing the majority of the Gullah people eventually resulting in less than 700 acres of the land on Hilton Head still being owned by Gullah individuals.

African American churches have been and continue to be actively involved in the community and community change. For the purpose of discussion, while recognizing numerous significant factors of community change, the authors propose focusing onSocial Entrepreneurship as a macro social work response which is consistent with historical AAC roles in helping their communities, thusly making it a natural response to community change due to gentrification. The authors seek to present this proposal by briefly discussing: (1) the history of the African American Church; (2) Community Change; (3) Gentrification and; (4) Social Entrepreneurship (SE) and then promote the reader to draw their own conclusions.

2. Discussion

2.1 History of the African American Church

To better understand the current community activities and roles of the AAC, it is helpful to understand the development and changes in those by reviewing associated history of the church. Religion has been a powerful aspect of African American life. Enslavement severely damaged the traditional African system of kinship and devastated the family. Enslaved Africans began to worship in secret away from their masters where they sang and dreamed of freedom from their oppression. The secret church of the African slaves has been called the "Invisible Institution" (Frazier, 1974). Lincoln & Mamiya (2001) indicate that over time, African spirituality expanded and developed. In 1773, free African-Americans established their first church, the Silver Bluff

Baptist Church. African Americans also established mutual aid societies which were designed to assist families in need. It is also related that the AAC created insurance companies, banks, schools, and affordable housing. The AAC has provided an arena for political initiatives such as the abolitionist and civil rights movements and has also developed artistic and musical talent. .

While there are churches which are reluctant to speak about injustice and there may be a lack of interest to change circumstances of oppression (McMickle, 2006), over the years the AAC has responded to community needs by engaging in new forms of community outreach and support. Examples of such actions include: 1) Rev. Johnny Ray Youngblood of Saint Paul Community Church in Brooklyn, NY spearheading the Nehemiah Homes Project which constructed two thousand homes in the city (Pinn, 2009); 2)the Balm in Gilead ministry which is designed to prevent and address HIV/AIDS in the African American community (Kunjufu, 2004); 3) the developed of the prosperity gospel philosophy (Mumford, 2012), which appeals to our desires to be successful (Jones & Woodbridge, 2011); and 4) the creation of the National Baptist Educational Convention which strives to promote evangelism, Christian education, and to distribute Christian literature and music (McMickle, 2002). Martin (2002) suggests that the AAC has assisted with the process of moaning, mourning, and morning. Moaning is the expression of painful emotions from accumulated hurt. Mourning begins the process of healing through collective empathy and support. Finally, morning symbolizes the dawn of a new beginning and the realization of desired outcomes. The African American Church has a long history of community involvement. The prominent sociologist E. Franklin Frazier described the church as "a nation within a nation", an agent of moral authority, and as a refuge from a hostile society (Frazier, 1974). In essence, the church has given African Americans a reason for living in the midst of great despair.

2.2 Community Change

Community change can have dramatic effect on both people and places. Community identity positively affects an individual's self-image, sense of competence and security while keeping links to the past which provide a sense of belonging(Peace, Holland, & Kellaher, 2006). Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2006) indicate that traditional communities can be referred to as physical spaces, like cities, towns, villages, and identifiable geographical entities as well as interaction, and a shared sense of identity. Nontraditional communities can also be defined by social, rather than physical, boundaries, such as individuals who share common interests, activities, or identity.

Community development is described as activities designed to enhance the quality of life for working-class, low-income neighborhoods (Tucker-Worgs, 2011). The AAC gets involved in initiatives to respond to changes which affect the socioeconomic capital of its members. The AAC assists members who have lost jobs by providing for basic needs through clothes closets and food pantries. The church provides assistance in helping individuals become more marketable which may include afterschool tutoring, resume writing, and interviewing skills. The church encourages voter registration and participation to highlight issues such as gun violence, quality education, minimum wage increases, and police practices. Finally, churches have created community develop corporations that create affordable housing and senior citizen residential complexes (Franklin, 1997).

2.3 Gentrification

Lees and Ley(2008) describe gentrification as a 'transformation of a working-class or vacant area of the central city into middle-class residential and/or commercial use'. The changes can be economic, political, physical, social, and cultural, but gentrification has become extremely diverse, such that researchers need to take 'into account context, locality, and temporality in more detail'. Although we are coming to better understand gentrification, we do not yet fully know the characteristics and experiences of the people involved, the ironies and contradictions of the gentrification process, nor the roles of families in community change. When governments promote gentrification, they may place conditions upon it in order to promote those types of changes that policymakers favor.

Research on gentrification in the United States appears to be dominated by the question of resident displacement. On one side of the argument, researchers claim that high-income residents moving into gentrifying community's profit from the community and community residents with limited resources and that "with the return of upper-and middle- income people to the central city communities, many local very-low income residents are displaced and dispersed with furthered downward mobility in search for affordable housing" (Mulroy, 2004, p. 84). Research exists which explores resident perceptions of gentrification, this research has focused on racial exclusion, and conclusions have been drawn about varying attitudes about gentrification from residents based on their race (Freeman, 2009; Shaw & Sullivan, 2011).

Gentrification is occurring in many major cities and in some areas where AAC are located. Middle-class, mostly white residents have moved into predominately African American working-class and low-income areas. Churches face challenges trying to maintain and expand their memberships. Many new residents have no connection or appreciation for the church's value in the community (Tucker-Worgs, 2011).

2.4 Social Entrepreneurship

Historically, religious groups have often had strong links with entrepreneurial activities. Social Entrepreneurship (SE)can be related to the changing role of the church and its' community (Unruh, 2004; Werber, Mendel & Pitkin-Derose, 2014). Social entrepreneurship is influenced by environmental dynamics, which includes the degree to which it lends toward being proactive in designing programs that are productive in faith based communities (Schwartz, Warkentin & Wilkinson, 2008).

The contrast between SE and commercial entrepreneurship constitutes an appropriate starting point to consider more concrete organizational features of the strategies and actions preferred by social entrepreneurs as opposed to their for-profit peer (Agafonow, 2014; Dacin, Dacin & Matear, 2010). The concept of SE means different things to different people and researchers. One group of researchers refers to SE as not-for-profit initiatives in search of alternative funding strategies or management schemes to create social values (Jensen, 2014). A second group sees SE as a practice that integrates economic and social value creation with a long heritage and global presences (Choi & Majumdar, 2014).

There is broad agreement that social entrepreneurs and their undertakings are driven by the desire to benefit society in some way. That is another way of saying that the social entrepreneur aims to increase well-being of a given community (Alderson, 2012; Choi & Majumdar, 2014).

While entrepreneurial phenomena aimed at economic development have received a great amount of scholarly attention (Dacin, Dacin & Matear, 2010), entrepreneurship as a process to foster social progress has only recently attracted the interest of researchers (Jensen, 2014). The concept of social entrepreneurship is still poorly defined and its boundaries to other fields of study remain ambiguous (Agafonow, 2014; Dacin, Dacin & Matear, 2010; Jensen, 2014). While early studies centered on the question of how the personality or background of the entrepreneur determines entrepreneurial behavior today, it is widely recognized that the focus of entrepreneurship research should be entrepreneurial process or behavior (Finke & Stark, 2005). At the extreme are those who hold that some social goal(s) must be the exclusive aim of social entrepreneur.

3. Summary

In the days of slavery, the African American church, helped thousands of slaves seek freedom. When slavery concluded, the church started banks, insurance companies, and schools. During the civil rights movement, ministers like Dr. Martin Luther King provided the primary leadership. Today, the AAC continues to be actively involved in the community and community change. For the purpose of discussion, the authors briefly discussed SE as a macro social work response being consistent with historical AAC community roles and activities, thusly making it a natural response to community change due to gentrification. From the brief discussions of (1) the history of the AAC; (2) Community Change; (3) Gentrification and; (4) SE, it is suggested that SE is a good fit for the AAC.

Despite significant progress over the years, African Americans still suffer many ills of society. Because of gentrification, the AAC continues as an essential community institution providing macro social work services such as social entrepreneurship. The African American community must prepare to continually build independent institutions in an environment of decreasing support from the federal government.

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