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Towards Understanding the Emergence of African-American Church Schools: Early Hypotheses and a Research Agenda

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A survey of the Atlanta metropolitan area reveals a growing trend in African-American church sponsored schools. The emergence of these schools is curious in that it is counterintuitive to the protection of the public school system on which the majority of African-Americans rely; the schools are mainly in the suburbs where the public schools offer relatively high standards of education; and there seems to be no public debate accompanying a trend that is likely to have far-reaching public policy implications. In this article, the author discusses the possible reasons for the emergence of these schools and the potential public policy implications.

Introduction

One of the major dimensions of social change observable in the African-American community in metropolitan Atlanta is the rapid growth in schools providing elementary and secondary level education, which are operated by individual Christian church congregations. This is

an interesting and somewhat curious development. On the one hand, the emergence of these schools suggests an ongoing redefinition of the role of the African-American Church as an institution of civil society. However, while viewing this development within this context provides a useful focal point for reflection, this perspective does not readily yield insights into crucial questions such as why this development is occurring at this particular time; what it actually means in terms of the changing role of the African-American church in civil society; and what larger public impact might ensue from this development.

This essay draws on observations and preliminary research conducted in the Atlanta metropolitan area during the year 2002. The essay explores two overarching questions, which are raised by the growing presence of African-American church schools: 1) How intentional are African-American church schools in defining a unique community serving role for themselves in the education marketplace? 2) What is the potential public policy impact of the growing presence of these schools in the Atlanta region and nationally? The essay raises additional questions within the context of positing an agenda for future research on this interesting development in black civil society.

Indicators From The Atlanta Regional Context

One easily observes the rapid growth of African-American church schools devoted to formal education at the elementary and secondary levels in the Atlanta metropolitan area. At first blush, there are many factors, which seem to explain this development. The Atlanta region has a large African-American population; one of the largest concentrations of middle class African-Americans in the country; and it has a large and vibrantly rich African-American church community. Along with substantial black population growth in the region in the past three decades, the Atlanta black church community has experienced rapid growth as well, especially as the suburban areas have experienced rapid African-American in-migration from outside the Atlanta region.

Consequently, there are more than a dozen African-American mega churches in the Atlanta region with congregation sizes in the range of 5,000 to 25,000 members. Moreover, there seems to be an almost endless sprouting of new churches and increasing membership in most churches that fall into the moderate size range of 600-2000 members. It is perhaps fair to say, impressionistically at least, that the black church community in the Atlanta region represents a growth industry.

The Atlanta black church community is large, significantly diverse, rich in ecclesiastical and liturgical styles, and may share an historical legacy of community service and activism that continues to be widely embraced and actualized by newly emergent congregations as well. In short, the black church community in Atlanta comprises a tremendous asset to the metropolitan region. Against this backdrop of a well-endowed black church community, we see the emergence of a significant presence of church schools, which is, based on preliminary research, disproportionately located in suburban areas.

A preliminary search for African-American church schools in the predominantly black south end of DeKalb County (a suburban jurisdiction east of the city of Atlanta that hosts a large black middle class) alone, for example, revealed no less than a dozen African-American church schools that provide formal education at the elementary and/or secondary level. Many of these schools have sizeable enrollments and moderately high tuition (See Table 1). Many are hosted by large, affluent, solidly middle class congregations. One of these church schools, Greenforest Christian Academic Center, has just completed a 52,000 square foot, $8 million dollar facility as an addition to its school campus. The new facility provides computers, televisions and VCRs in every classroom, and electronic technology that enables parents to observe their children in classrooms in real time. The emergence of an African-American church school with this level of resources is a compellingly interesting development indeed.

Table 1

African-American Church Schools in South DeKalb County, Atlanta Region*

School	Grades	Capacity	Tuition
Cathedral Academy	Pre-K-12	325	$4,620 - $4,840
Children for Christ Academy	K-6	75	$3,825
Faith Academy	Pre-K-8	241	$3,500 (members) $3,950 (non-members)
Grace Heritage Christian School	Pre-K-9	350	$3,500 - $3,800
Greenforest/McCalep Christian Academic Center	K-12	460	$4,000-$5,400
Green Pastures Christian School	K-12	277	$3,500 - $3,950
Kingdom Academy	K-4	350	$4,200
New Generation Christian Academy	Pre-K-7	100	$4,085 - $4,214
Sparks Christian Academy Preparatory School for Girls	Pre-K-10	85	$4,000
St. Peter Claver Catholic School	Pre-K-8	270	$3,150 (Catholics) $4,695 (non-Catholics)
Victory Christian Academy	Pre-K-6	75	$3,699 - $4,600
Will-Mariah Christian School	K-4	60	$2,950

*Based on a Spring 2002 study.

Given that African-American church schools are growing rapidly in the Atlanta region, it is reasonable to wonder whether that this development might be occurring as well in other cities and metropolitan areas with demographic characteristics similar to Atlanta. Thus, we may well be witnessing the emergence of a national phenomenon, emanating within the context of privatized decision making, but with potentially major public policy consequences. Even for a single geographic region, and more so as a possibly emergent development in African-American communities nationwide, the emergence, and particularly the significant growth of African-American church schools constitute a peculiar development for several reasons. First, this phenomenon is occurring at a time when African-Americans effectively control most big city school districts, both in terms of dominance on school boards and dominance in top administrative positions. In many large cities, it is African-Americans who disproportionately decide how schools are funded and who decide the content

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of public school curricula (although they cannot indiscriminately introduce religion-based instruction). This is certainly the case in the three jurisdictions in the Atlanta region that host the largest concentrations of African-Americans: the City of Atlanta, DeKalb County, and Fulton County.

Secondly, presumably the argument against school choice generally and vouchers specifically is largely an argument to protect, revitalize, and sustain public school systems (Sugarman & Kamerer 1999; Moe 2000), and is thus an argument which is particularly supportive of the interests of African-Americans who are disproportionately concentrated in urban school systems (Engel, 1999). Thus it is curious that an African-American church school movement would emerge as an effective, albeit perhaps unintended, counterpoint to the argument against school choice (Smith and Meier, 1995). Thirdly, the rapid growth

of African-American church schools and the potential implications of this development are occurring almost totally outside of the school choice debate and concomitant debates about school vouchers. Indeed, in the Atlanta region, the African-American church school movement is occurring without any public debate or public attention at all. This is a quiet revolution and it is, quite arguably, like most important developments, apparently purposeful, yet quite possibly significantly counterintuitive in many of its implications. So how do we begin to understand this somewhat curious development?

Theoretical Context: Religion, Politics, and The Black Church

The broader intellectual context, which informs the overall emergence of African-American church schools, is to be found at the critical nexus of religion and politics in American life and in an understanding of the role of the African-American church in black life and black civil society. The persistence of religion as a salient factor in American life and society places America in an interestingly unique position among advanced industrial societies, according to social theory and comparative social realities (Wald 1997). Modernization theory holds that societies change in response to the onslaught of rapid urbanization, industrial production, and advances in education, technology and communications. This change marks the triumph of science over myth and the supernatural, and hence religion should wane dramatically as a crucible for the formation of values and as a source of influence on politics and public affairs. If religion and churches persisted in advanced industrial/technological societies, religion would become privatized at the individual level with no basis for influencing public affairs. However, America has been a glaring exception to the predictions of social theory.

While religion in America might have become secularized to some extent and subsequently significantly privatized, it yet remains a

vital and multidimensional force in private lives and in the full range of public affairs. Religion in America shapes personal values and influences policy preferences. It is a major political resource, motivating individuals to become involved in politics and influencing voting behavior. Religion has proven extremely useful in forming and mobilizing political interest groups and in structuring the terms of the political debate. Religion defines the broader contours of American culture nationally, and significantly defines the contours of specific sub-cultures (Wald, 1997).

Within the African-American community, religion has traditionally played a unique role in public life, especially in terms of the historical pervasiveness of the church in African-American life and culture. Many analysts of African-American history credit the black church with being the veritable cultural womb of black life, historically giving birth to schools, banks, insurance companies and low income housing; nurturing musical, dramatic, and artistic development; and incubating and sustaining political struggle. All of these things emerged from the black church along with traditional concerns about spiritual well being and moral behavior (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990). Some analysts also predicted, and longed for, a differentiation of the role of the black church, meaning the relinquishing of all roles beyond the purely spiritual, citing such differentiation as a prerequisite to successful assimilation of African-Americans into the American mainstream. This latter group of analysts cited in particular such perceived negative characteristics of the black church as the strongly authoritarian tendencies of black church leaders and the general anti-intellectual bent of these leaders as well (Myrdal, 1944; Frazier, 1964).

Most contemporary analysts of the black church acknowledge that a partial differentiation of its role in African-American life has indeed occurred, while also acknowledging its continued significance in black private and public life. Most contemporary studies of the African-American church focus on its multidimensional role in helping to structure African-American political participation and behavior, and in reinforcing religion based communal values (Harris, 1994; Calhoun-

Brown, 1999; Cohen 1999). It is widely agreed among scholars that the black church remains an institution of special significance in African-American life despite its diminished earlier role of pervasive socio-cultural incubation and dominance.

The black church, for example, is still a major resource for the development of black social capital, and the overwhelming majority of African-Americans still attend churches that are almost exclusively African-American in membership. Thus the black church reinforces in major ways both the reality and symbolism of a distinct and persistently separate black community. Similarly, while the African-American leadership class is no longer dominated by ministers, few African-Americans seeking political office--and not a few whites as well--would overlook the importance of seeking the blessings of the black ministerial leadership. Research continues to show that the African-American church continues to shape African-American opinion (Walton, 1985; Smith and Seltzer, 1992; Wald, 1997; Walters and Smith, 1999).

Some analysts theorize that the Black church exists in a context of multiple dialectical tensions, a situation which derives from its historic need to frequently shift its roles, or at least the relative emphasis of its various roles, as it interacts with the larger environment (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990). Perhaps it is within this context of environmental scanning and responsiveness that the African-American church community, like churches generally, has become a collection of multidimensional and increasingly multipurpose organizations which provide a wide array of services and which increasingly exhibit organizational capacity and structure which are commonly associated with complex bureaucracies. We know, for example, that, in response to community needs, African-American churches are heavily engaged in a range of social services at some level and that these activities are rarely supported by government or

Recent public policy developments anticipate an increasingly formalized role for the African-American church...

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corporate funding. We also know that recent public policy developments such as Charitable Choice and other "Faith-Based Initiatives," anticipate an increasingly formalized role as policy implementer for African-American churches in particular (Persons & Calhoun-Brown 2001).

While the conventional ethos of "a charge to keep" would predict black church involvement in social services and charitable outreach activities, a contemporaneous interpretation of that ethos would not readily predict black church involvement in formal education (beyond Pre-school programs which mainly constitute the provision of day care as a social service) at the elementary and secondary levels. The black church is widely credited with having spawned a number of historically black colleges and universities. But that was a part of its historical role when the black community had severely restricted access to educational opportunities and when African-Americans experienced wholesale racial discrimination and isolation. Yet, in discussing the role of the black church in education, even contemporary studies still harken back to this historical legacy. That is largely because there are no extant studies of the contemporary role of the African-American church in education. The absence of such studies reflects the fact that the historical black church role in education has largely withered away. Most of the schools and colleges, which were historically· spawned by the black church, have largely shed their church affiliation and religious identities. While not without historical precedent, African-American church schools at the elementary and secondary level represent a major new development in black civil society.

The Historical and Comparative Context of Church Schools

In terms of comparative historical developments, there have been two dominant variants of church schools in American society: the Catholic parochial school system, and a large but loose network of white, fundamentalist Christian schools. The Catholic school system developed

in response to strong anti-immigrant sentiment against Irish Catholics and the desire to preserve the Catholic faith in a strange, largely non-Catholic land (Walch, 1995). White, fundamentalist Christian schools emerged both in opposition to forced integration of public schools in the South and as a conservative critique of, and in resistance to cultural and theological modernism and a perceived liberalization of church and religion (Cox, 1984). These were broad-based denominational movements that were buttressed by strong theological, ideological, and political sentiments.

African-American Christian schools are not true counterparts to either of the dominant historical church school movements. First, African-American church schools are not truly denominationally based. While there appears to be more Baptist Church schools than other denominationally linked church schools in the Atlanta area, this is simply because there are many more Baptist congregations in the Atlanta area than other denominations. However, I should hasten to add that this dominance of Baptist congregations and Baptist congregational linked schools does not constitute a denominationally based church school movement. There are many different "Baptist denominations" in Black America, all well represented in Atlanta, and there are many variants of "independent Baptist" or non-denominational Baptist congregations in the Atlanta area. Hence the Baptist label on a congregation or church school does not necessarily indicate a definitive denominational identity. Moreover, the African-American church schools identified in Table 1 represent a range of denominational affiliations and status.

Second, although these schools are religious schools, they do not clearly emerge from any major, identifiable theological ethos. While there did emerge a "Liberation Theology" that loosely united the black church community nationally during the days of the civil rights movement, its saliency has since declined significantly and it has not been replaced by any clear alternative or overarching black theology (Wilmore 1983; Paris 1985).

Thirdly, there is no identifiable ideological or political movement or context out of which African-American church schools emerge. Indeed, the emergence of these schools might have been predicted historically due to political and racial alienation, but not so in the present context, at least not in the Atlanta area. Interestingly, in the Atlanta area, African-American church schools are growing most rapidly in jurisdictional and demographic contexts where African-Americans control both local governments and school systems. And, although there are significant issues of school quality in the Atlanta area, which have disproportionate implications for African-American children (as is the case across the nation), there have not emerged in local political contests any clear issues, which focus on the need for new alternatives to public education. (I say "new alternatives" to public education to denote the fact that at least since integration, elite white, secular private schools have been highly sought after by many middle class African-Americans in the city of Atlanta). Moreover, at least preliminary research indicates that the rapid growth of African-American church schools is occurring in the suburbs, where the public schools are generally qualitatively better than in the inner city of Atlanta. The emergence of African-American church schools in the Atlanta suburbs is a quiet and significantly curious revolution.

Towards An Agenda for Research on African-American Church Schools

Most of what we know about church schools as social and educational entities we know mainly from the study of parochial schools, and to a lesser extent from the study of white, fundamentalist Christian schools (Walch 1995; Youniss, et al 2000; Glenn and Berger 2000). What these studies tell us is that church schools, Catholic and fundamentalist Christian alike, possess an essential and defining character, based not only on their teaching of principles of faith and religion, but also because of their unique and decided purposefulness, a

purposefulness rooted in a commitment to being different. These church schools are seen as being different in terms of providing educational products, which represent clear and distinct alternatives to public school education.

From the perspective of social science research, it is useful to assume that the phenomenon of African-American church schools is a socially purposeful development. After all, these schools do emerge out of a kind of social system of sorts: the African-American church community. As such, we might view this development as a "community-serving" phenomenon, at least according to some conceptions of community serving--which ought to be identifiable. There are many divergent characterizations of the changing social identity and social roles of the black church that are to be found in the social science literature (Harris 1999; Calhoun-Brown 1996; Baer & Singer 1992; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Paris 1985; Wilmore 1983; Frazier 1964; DuBois 1903). However one of the consistent themes in almost all of these characterizations is the constancy of the church's involvement in "grappling with the social problems of the day." That is, the black church is almost consistently seen as an agent of social reform in the sense of seeking to ameliorate or resolve pressing social problems.

So it is within this broader conceptual context of social reform as social action that we may proffer a foundational hypothesis as an anchor for a broad-based research agenda on African-American church schools. One might argue that there are (at least) two overarching questions around which to organize a research agenda on African-American church schools: 1) How intentional are African-American church schools in defining the educational product which they offer and in defining a unique community service role for themselves in the education marketplace? 2) What are the likely public impacts and policy implications of the growing presence of these schools in the Atlanta region and nationally? The focus now shifts to a discussion of these two questions.

Structured Intentionality: A Key Analytic Premise

What we know about African-American church schools is that they collectively represent new entrants to the education marketplace. However, little else is known about these schools. We know very little about the defining character of these schools. We know very little about the educational product and learning experiences that they offer. We might reasonably assume that as they become major competitors in the education marketplace, the growing presence of African-American church schools will have a significant public impact. Yet we know very little about how individual African-American church schools position themselves in the education marketplace, nor whether there is consistency of market positioning among these schools.

We know that African-American church schools are first of all religious schools, but it is reasonable to assume that they are more than that. Yet, we must understand how these schools define and distinguish themselves beyond a strict mission in religious instruction. Part of the answer might be found in discerning the raison d'etre for the emergence of these schools. In other words, what is it that African-American churches are seeking to achieve in establishing church schools?

African-American churches engage in a broad range of activities that are generally characterized as "serving the needs of the community." "Community" in this regard is broadly defined and does not refer exclusively to a proximate, spatially defined area, but rather, in this case, encompasses the broader conception of community as socio-culturally linked individuals of African-American descent. It is reasonable to assume that the emergence of African-American church schools is one more manifestation of a community serving ethos, an effort by some members of the black church community to address some specific and distinct needs of the African-American community. The needs of the black community are numerous and diverse, and subject to great debate in their definition. Rather than pursuing a definition of needs in terms of specific problems, I have taken a broad conceptual

approach to defining needs in terms of a distillation of essential characteristics and values, which can be operationalized in sufficient specificity such that they can drive a purposeful training initiative. This approach follows those, which are commonly utilized in defining the mission, and vision of most specially focused educational systems.

For purposes of proffering a foundational hypothesis for a research agenda, I have chosen the following elements as a distillation of the needs of the African-American community as they might be defined in a church/religious-based educational mission:

1. Character development - the inculcation of moral values, ethical standards, and personal integrity. This focus might be seen as a response to general problems of moral decay in society at large as well as a response to such problems as crime and substance abuse, etc.

2. Free enterprise training - developing business acumen and an appreciation for how to build and maintain wealth. This focus might be seen as a response to the need for wealth accumulation and pursuit of economic and financial independence by black Americans.

3. Leadership training - preparation to assume a role of leadership in civic, business, political, church, and general public affairs. This focus might be seen as a response to the need to pursue deliberate efforts in the development of future leaders.

4. Community service - an orientation towards the importance of civic engagement as vital to sustaining a democratic society at large and a healthy local community environment.

The above elements are somewhat arbitrary and analysts can easily debate these specific choices. However, the above elements can readily serve as a kind of index of what I have defined as "a structured intentionality" of the sort which we might expect to find incorporated in the curricula and overall learning experience of African-American church schools. This structured intentionality would constitute the community-serving mission and vision, the purposefulness, and the defining character of African-American church schools. In the education marketplace, we might expect that this structured intentionality would

constitute the comparative advantage of African-American church schools relative to their competitors.

Thus, as a theoretical proffer for launching a research agenda, what one might hypothesize is that African-American church schools should exhibit a distinct and defining purposefulness in their anchoring mission and vision, or a structured intentionality. This structured intentionality should be manifest in the curricula and learning experiences provided by these schools and should be observable and identifiable in some form. Moreover, given the historic legacy of the African-American church in community serving activities, we might expect that the defining character of African-American church schools would be oriented towards a relatively strong definition of community service.

This hypothesis, is subject to reasonable exploration and testing although considerable work remains to be done in regard to anticipating just which components of an educational curriculum might reflect these elements. However, case studies of individual church schools and/or comparative case studies involving interviews with church school officials and examination of school curricula activities should yield useful insights in supporting or refuting this hypothesis. A beginning set of specific research questions might include the following:

1. What is the character of African-American church schools as a special set of schools?

2. How do these schools seek to define a unique community oriented and community-serving mission aside from an expected religious focus of their curricula?

3. Do these schools operationalize and program certain principles such as character development, free enterprise training, leadership development, and community service into their curricula and total learning experiences, and how do they do it?

In focusing on the structured intentionality of African-American church schools, analysts can examine the broad question of whether and how these schools are clearly intentional in educating students around

specific principles, which represent a structured responsiveness to perceived needs of the African-American community. In other words, do these schools manifest a defining character beyond an expected focus on religious instruction? An understanding of the defining character of African-American church schools is a prerequisite to any full understanding of the policy implications and potential public impacts of their presence.

Public Impacts of Religion-Based Education

Generically speaking, African-American church schools are private schools. Thus they constitute privatized decision making about education that will inevitably result in some public impact. Determining the current and potential market share of these schools is one task for analysts to pursue in terms of general research and in terms of helping to assess the magnitude and nature of the public impacts of these schools. Given the current overall unfavorable policy climate for public education in America, one

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might expect the potential for a substantial public impact. Currently public education in America suffers from a general loss of confidence which has resulted in the introduction of multiple alternative paths to "reform" ranging from charter schools to school vouchers to privatization of public schools. Each of these reform efforts could be a potential boost to church schools. Also, given the rapid growth in African-American church schools, which is observable in some locales, it is reasonable to assume that these schools represent a potentially substantial presence in the education marketplace.

What will be the public impacts of a major presence of African-American church schools? This is an essential question and as such raises many other questions in turn. What are the implications of the strong

presence of African-American church schools for the political consensus, which under girds local funding of public schools? This is perhaps the most urgent policy relevant question and points to an area of greatest potential public impacts. What are the full costs (beyond tuition) of church schools and how are these costs distributed? For example, while parents pay tuition, church members at large subsidize the costs of church schools through their general and directed giving. Both parents and church members are taxpayers and thus experience "double taxation" for education. This situation could easily rise to the level of political significance and public controversy, which could in turn contribute to a threat to the all-important political consensus which under girds locally based, property tax support for public education. Within the context of this particular outcome, African-American church schools are significantly counterintuitive vis-a-vis the broader interests of the black community in that they pose a significant threat to public education.

Another way of posing the question above is to raise the question of whether supporters of church schools--parents and church officials--comprise a built-in and growing base for mobilizing support within the black community for school vouchers? We know that ministers and church leaders can play pivotal roles in terms of the exercise of public influence. Hence, what we might presently reluctantly refer to as "the African-American church school movement" may in time evolve into an important set of privatized decisions and actions, which result in profound and perhaps largely unintended public impacts with disproportionately adverse impacts for the African-American community at large.

External Environmental Stimuli or Internal Organizational Needs?

Up to this point the focus of this essay has been based on the implicit assumption that African-American church schools emerge as a response to stimuli from the external environment of African-American churches: that African-American church schools should reflect a structured intentionality driven by external stimuli. From this perspective these schools are seen as purposeful actions within the context of some definition of external community needs. As a major institution of civil society, the black church, like all other organizations and institutions, exists within the environment of larger black society specifically and larger American society generally. Both of these external environments of the black church comprise major social systems, which shape and mold the character and nature of the black church as an institution. Thus, not only can we expect that the African-American church would be responsive to stimuli from its external environment, indeed, the history of the church is a testimony of this truth.

However, there are other perspectives from which to derive explanations of the emergence of African-American church schools, and especially for purposes of social science research, these perspectives should not be overlooked. For example, we must explore the possibility that African-American church schools emerge from the internal organizational maintenance needs of specific congregations. This perspective dramatically shifts the focus of a search for explanations and specifically leads to a focus on what is essentially the domain of strategic planning within church organizations. It is, of course, somewhat strange to couple the two concepts of churches (sacred places of worship and) as specially bonded communities of faith and the process of strategic planning which is almost exclusively associated with secular organizations. However, the critical nexus between these two seemingly disparate concepts is their generic link within the context of organizations and some core functions and needs which pertain to all

organizational types, churches included.

Some core elements and concepts of strategic planning such as values, vision, mission, marketing, strategies, are clearly evident in the activities of black churches. Whether one stands on the outside and simply surveys the composite activities and enterprises of a particular set of individual congregations, or whether one deliberately engages in prolonged discussions with different pastors about their visions for their specific congregations, the results are the same. One clearly sees the consequences of a world of privatized decision making in which highly visionary leaders marshal resources and execute enormous plans which unfold across the urban landscape and deeply enrich the lived experiences of many. Again, observations and conversations from the Atlanta region are illustrative although the pattern is undoubtedly replicated in communities across America.

At Green Pastures Christian Church in south DeKalb County, the female pastor is leading a flock in excess of 3,000 members. The church has recently embarked on the development of an entire urban village, to consist of a collection of residential choices, small businesses, and diverse community amenities. This major venture in mixed-use real estate development will unfold over a period of several years. This church also hosts a church school covering grades K-12. Antioch North Baptist Church, which is located downtown Atlanta in the shadows of Coca Cola Headquarters and the Georgia Tech Campus, represents both similarities and contrasts to the vision as manifest by Green Pastures. The strategic vision of Antioch North is anchored in a highly successful social services ministry--Antioch Urban Ministries--which employs in excess of 60 people and consists of a complex of social services programs which pivot around substance abuse, homelessness, HIV-AIDS, and tuberculosis treatment. In support of these ministries the church owns a dozen housing and counseling facilities in addition to owning a community development corporation, which in turn owns a host of residential and commercial properties (Persons & Calhoun-Brown 2001).

At Greenforest Community Baptist Church in DeKalb County,

the separately housed and operated Greenforest Social Services operates a food pantry, hosts several state and federal food assistance programs and a utility assistance program for the needy. Greenforest also operates a community development corporation, which in turn owns low-income rental properties. This church also operates a nationally acclaimed academy that serves grades K-12. Antioch A.M.E, also located in south DeKalb County, operates a thriving Day Care and Nursery, and has recently completed plans for the development of a Senior Citizen Residential Village. These are but four examples among many manifestations of the diverse strategic visions of African-American churches and their leaders (Persons & Calhoun-Brown, 2001).

Both the distant and up-close views of these churches indicate that they behave in ways which define traditional organizations-- defining a vision and mission for themselves; differentiating themselves from each other; marketing their mission and services; catering to identifiable clienteles and publics; and being characterized by distinguishable and distinct cultures. These patterns of behavior reflect both responses to the external environment as well as decisions about promoting and maximizing the organizational maintenance needs of individual congregations. What this tells us is that we might well view the emergence of African-American church schools as a reflection of a defined vision and mission which emanates from the context of the internal organizational dynamics of specific congregations. Although there is an emergent body of literature which focuses on churches as organizational types (Ammerman 1999; Brinkerhoff 1999; Harris 1998), the area of internally driven church organizational behavior remains a significantly unexplored scholarly territory but one which beckons in response to research questions about church schools.

Summary

The emergence of African-American church schools providing education at the elementary and secondary levels is at minimum a most curious social development. It is quite possibly the unfolding of major social change within black civil society. Although this development constitutes privatized decision making, it has the potential to result in far-reaching public consequences. From the perspective of public policy, this development intersects with and informs such issues as public funding of elementary and secondary education, the school vouchers debate, privatizing of public functions, and the overall future of public education as we conventionally know and define it.

There are many questions, which pertain to this development, which invite the attention of social science analysts and thus offer rich and unique research opportunities. For example, the questions raised in this essay lend themselves to numerous opportunities for case studies of various aspects of individual church schools; sets of case studies from specific metropolitan regions; and cross-case analyses of national patterns. Analyses of the dynamics of the local political contexts wherein African-American church schools are emergent and growing offer another set of research opportunities in terms of foci on external environmental stimuli. It would be interesting to know whether these schools comprise a system of sorts, particularly within specific geographic regions. Similarly, it would be useful to uncover the presence or absence of both regional and national level consistencies in the structured intentionality and public impacts of these schools.

The opportunities are equally inviting for exploration of internal organizational stimuli of individual African-American congregations which host church schools. Whether and how church school personnel and host church pastors perceive the public impact and policy implications of their ventures into the educational market place comprise a most intriguing set of questions. It will be particularly interesting to understand the rationale for establishing church schools in the first place.

Questions regarding the nature of involvement of church leaders in issues of educational policy in their communities comprise fertile research ground as well. In sum, the emergence of African-American church schools reflect a dimension of change in the role of the African-American churches and it is a level and area of change which merits serious scholarly attention and broad dissemination of research findings.

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