

# The Future of the Adult Education in the Urban African American Church

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## **ABSTRACT**

Our urban communities have experienced a transformation of sorts. Once thriving with numerous businesses and churches, and swelling populations, they no longer enjoy the advantages they once had. Businesses have flocked to outer areas, while financially-able adults have migrated to the suburbs. As a result, many residents in today's urban communities are low-income or poor. Despite these transitions in urban centers, the African American church has remained a stronghold. As such it has provided education for children as well as adults. In the face of continuous decay of some urban communities, it appears the church's future adult educational role will not only continue, but be enhanced for several reasons.

## **INTRODUCTION**

While adult education has been conducted in formal settings for years, informal venues have served to provide adult education as well. It has been conducted in the woods, homes, libraries, and within religious institutions such as mosques, temples, and churches. A review of the literature on faith-based institutions reveals a long-standing record of providing adult education on a variety of topics. During clandestine church meetings, enslaved Africans learned how to read and about the Bible. When it was no longer illegal to teach a group of Blacks, the church expanded its educational programs to provide parenting skills, sewing, financial management and a host of other subjects. With the influx of Blacks to urban communities between the late 1800s and early 1900s, the church had to accelerate its educational efforts to meet the overwhelming demand for education. Adult education was crucial in urban areas as it assisted African American adults in adjusting to their new environments that were in stark contrast to their rural experiences. Although urban communities have experienced a transformation and decline, the African American church continues to play an important educational role.

## **ADULT EDUCATION**

Adult education has experienced a mutation of sorts over the years. But, even with its changes in shape and form, it has enabled adults to meet their learning needs. Hence, adult education has responded to societal and individual needs. For example, between the 1900s and the 1940s women gained the right to vote and there was a migration of African Americans to Northern cities. During this time, birth control education was promoted, community-based education was popularized, libraries played a more important role in adult education, and the field of adult education was professionalized. Over the next three decades (1950s-1980s), GI's were returning from wars, Sputnik moved Americans from their scientific comfort zone, the Civil Rights Movement was re-ignited, and there was the advent of personal computers. Within the field of adult education the number of night schools multiplied, the development of correspondence courses became an alternative to face-to-face classes for those who found it difficult to attend a formal class setting. In the 1990s, our fast-paced lifestyle gained momentum,

there were medical advances, an increase in the number of home computers, higher divorce rates, and the return to work of retired persons who were living longer. Adult education had to take action once again. Thus, colleges and universities offered distance education, on-line degree programs and virtual universities. Over a long period of time, adult education has transformed itself to meet the ever-changing needs of adults. As Stubblefield and Keane (1994) point out, "All human societies, . . . require forms of learning and education for their survival and perpetuation" (p. 9). Thus it was incumbent upon the field of adult education to respond to the societal changes that took place.

While many only associate adult education with colleges and universities, informal learning can take place anywhere. Thus, in responding to educational needs, adult education was not limited to formal institutions. Informal learning was in the form of newspapers, books, television programs, and other avenues. Many informal institutions have been providing adult education over the years. Museums, libraries, community and cultural centers, and the church have served as venues for adult learning outside the traditional educational system. For African Americans, the African American church would eventually play an important educational role not only in rural communities, but also within urban America.

### **URBAN AMERICA**

Unfortunately, the term urban can have a negative connotation in the minds of some. It can denote crime, poverty, economic decline, welfare, family dissolution, and low levels of social organization (Wilson, 1996-1997). However, as Daley, Fisher, and Martin (2000) suggest, the urban environment currently has a dynamic flavor that is "derived largely from groups of people with sharp contrasts in languages, race and ethnicity, culture and economic and educational status" (p. 540). Urban metropolitan areas were transformed with an initial influx and subsequent exodus of city dwellers during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Between 1900 and 1950 the "average metropolitan area populations tripled and the number of metro areas doubled" (Black & Henderson, 1999, p. 254). In describing the rise and decline of the ghetto, a term that is sometimes used interchangeably with the word urban or inner city, Cutler, Glaeser, and Vigdor (1999) explain that between 1890 and 1940, ghettos were given birth as "Blacks migrated to urban areas and cities" (p. 455). And, adversely, African Americans in urban areas have historically suffered from high unemployment rates and high poverty levels.

Many of today's urban communities face a number of challenges. There is the challenge of overcoming decreased populations, persistent poverty, crime, and unemployment, just to name a few. As Glaeser and Sacerdote (1999) state, "Criminologists have discussed the urban tendency toward crime for decades" (p. 226). In some instances, many urban residents are moving to the suburbs, thus leaving urban residents who are often among the low income and least educated. This is also attested to by Wilson (as cited in Quillian, 1999) who stated that between the 1970s and 1980s many middle-class Blacks moved to the predominately white suburbs and left "behind neighborhoods composed largely of poor or near-poor families" p. 2). And, as Quillian further reported, "dwellers in modern poor neighborhoods are almost all members of minority races or ethnicities" (p. 1).

Efforts have been made to eradicate some of the urban problems. For example, the federal government initiated the Empowerment Zone. The Zone was developed to work with grass-roots organizations and build on the assets that communities possessed. However, its critics have claimed that the Zone projects treat symptoms but do not provide any cures (Paige,

1999). To address the problems of the inner city, some urban colleges provide adult education programs that address such issues as poverty, drugs, homelessness, and neighborhood revitalization (Battagli, 1995).

Despite the ills of urban communities, one of the institutions that continue to be a mainstay is the Black church. “Churches, as the most significant of faith-based organizations, are often the most enduring and resilient institutions in neighborhoods” (Tempesta & Isaac, 2001). Churches have been known to be one of the last institutions that leave a troubled neighborhood. Moreover, McRae, Carey, and Anderson-Scott (1998) state that faith-based organizations are one of the last strongholds to depart when inner cities decline. And in low-income neighborhoods, “The church is the most stable institution” (Ramsay, 1998). In addition to its stability, the church has been the only moral and institutional presence in the distressed neighborhood of urban communities that have experienced secularization and restructuring (Ramsey). Thus it is not surprising that urban churches “are leading an urban renaissance” (Bachelder, 2000, paragraph 1). Hence, it would appear that the Black church must play a crucial role in eradicating some of the ills that plague our urban communities. As it has done in the past, the urban church, through its educational programming can attempt to address the issues (i.e., societal and individual) facing urban communities.

### **AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH**

Historically, the church has been a major institution within the African American community. Chaves and Higgins (1991) report, “In the past, black churches have been the most vigorous institutions within African-American communities” (p. 425). As Howd (1999) stated, “Churches became clearinghouses for everything from education and family support to business and politics” (paragraph 10). Chaves and Higgins expound on this when they explain that “black churches historically have been the primary sponsors of secular social services, sources of autonomous indigenous political leadership, and reservoirs of organizational and human resources” (p. 425).

Since its formal organization in the 1790s, the Black church has “served as the hub of life in African American communities (Howd, 1999). This was true for African Americans not only in rural communities, but also in urban areas where many migrated in search for a better life. Those who migrated continued to practice their religious beliefs and traditions. Interestingly, the urban black church has even been described as a “prototype of the rural black church” (Wilson, 1979, pg. 199). According to Barr (1997), “Education joined evangelism as an early and continuing goal of the urban churches” (p. 377). Furthermore, the Black urban church “went beyond efforts at conversion and education through contributions to community social life during the late nineteenth century” (p. 377).

During their infancy, many churches provided education to Blacks in clandestine gatherings as there were laws prohibiting the education of slaves. Once the prohibitions were removed, there was a proliferation in the number of Black churches and denominations. Also, the church increased its efforts in providing adult education. Thus, for African Americans, the church was a conduit for education. The Black church makes an indelible impression on the culture of African Americans, thereby offering an environment for them to learn that is safe and non-threatening (Boyd-Franklin, 1989).

In her study of adult education in the Black church, Isaac (2002) identified four factors that impacted education. First, they included human and financial resources. This reflects the

church's financial stability and its ability to have paid staff members to oversee Christian education programs. Second, internal and external influences such as receptivity, needs of the congregation, and societal issues, respectively, were found to impact adult education. A third factor identified was the tradition or history of the church. One of the traditions of the Black church is its concern with human conditions on earth and in heaven (Lincoln, 1999). Lastly, in relation to the current study, one of the most important factors found was leadership. If the pastor does not support an educational program, more than likely it will not be successful. In her examination of the Black church's role in family literacy, Johnson (1999) makes the point clear as she noted that the values and attitudes of pastors or church leaders "will determine the role and the success of the church as a place for literacy learning and achievement" (p. 45). Thus, it is important to examine African American pastors' observations of the church's educational activities. The Black church has a history steeped in education and social services. Currently, it is deemed as the urban renaissance leader. With such features attributed to it, will the urban church's responsibility for the adult education of its members increase in the future? This study sought to answer that question.

### **METHODOLOGY**

West (1994) developed the instrument used in this study when she explored pastoral perceptions of adult education in the church. The instrument was validated based on a review by a panel of experts on the African American church. To collect data for the current study, a questionnaire was distributed to African American ministers of various denominations across the US, who pastored predominately Black churches. Responses from 99 of the ministers, who indicated their church was located in an urban area, are used for this study. For purposes of the current discussion, the question "Do you believe the church's responsibility for the adult education of its members is going to increase in the future?" was the focus. Participants responded with a yes or no answer. And as a follow up, an open-ended question, "If you answered yes or no, why do you feel this way?" was posed.

Although survey research was conducted initially, to analyze data for the current study, the pastors' written comments were typed verbatim without changing grammatical or structural errors. Thus, some responses do not appear in complete sentences. Generic comments, which appeared to be similar in word or concept, were categorized. Once the responses were placed in rubrics, they were operationalized. Frequency distributions and percentages were used as well as descriptive statistics to summarize background characteristics of the pastors.

The majority of pastors (80%) were males. Their educational background ranged from no high school diploma to those with doctorate degrees. Interestingly, 19 of the pastors held doctorate degrees. Over 30% of the pastors were between the ages of 40 to 49 years of age. However, 27% of the pastors were between the ages of 50 and 59. Participants represented the major denominations, i.e., Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal (AME), Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME), Church of God in Christ (COGIC), and Presbyterian. Over 50% had congregations that ranged in size from 100 to 499 members. Many (40%) of the pastors had been in their current pastoral role for 1-5 years.

### **FINDINGS**

In responding to the urban church's future role in adult education, approximately 90% of the pastors believed that the church's role would increase. They were further asked to explain

why they thought there would be an increase. Using thematic analysis, six rubrics were found to explain the church's increased educational role in the future.

### **Technology**

This rubric identified those responses that related to technology in some way. In some instances, technology had a direct or indirect impact on education in the church. Also, technology was seen in a positive and negative light. For example, one pastor indicated that, "We are living in an information age where knowledge is directly/indirectly related to progress." With a focus on computers, one respondent stated he saw an increase in the church's role, "Because the need for literacy is increasing for computers." From an adverse standpoint, one pastor believed that "Scientific and technical demands of the future will displace many in employment." With sights on the future, another pastor stated, "The young adult and youth of today who are lacking skills for a technical society will grow up to be ill functioning adults."

### **Decreasing or Shrinking Resources**

This rubric suggests that the lack of government and private funding sources will cause the church to be more involved in the education of its members. As one pastor succinctly stated, "... other sources are decreasing!" With a focus on education, one female pastor believed the church's role would increase "Because as the government cut out monies for education it will effect also the adult population, will be the job of the local church to pickup the pieces." Likewise, another pastor stated, "I believe public funds will reduce and people will turn to faith based organizations." This is espoused by another pastor, who poses a question when he states, "Social services are decreasing therefore some one/agency must fill the void. Why not the church?" Furthermore, according to yet another pastor, the church's role will increase "Due to the decline of social services and agencies – and with faith based partnership being on the rise."

### **Education**

In this category the lack of education is seen as a crux as well as a solution to future problems. For example, one female pastor stated that, "Some members may need remedial or higher education: cannot find time to do this; church should assist." This seems to suggest that some adults are lacking an adequate educational background to function in society. Along those same lines, another pastor indicated that the reason the role would be enhanced is because the number of dropouts is high. Relatedly, one pastor stated there was a "high rate of high school dropouts coming into church uneducated and holding positions over educated people." This might imply that tension or conflict could result from this situation. Education was seen not only impacting individuals but also the community and society. For instance, one pastor stated, "It is important to teach our people to educate themselves so they can help make a better community & society." This was echoed by another who said, "Without education of both our older and younger members the community will never grow and develop."

### **Economy**

This category is reflective of responses that relate to economic issues. From an occupational viewpoint, one pastor stated that, "Because of the changes in the need for more education in the work force to obtain better & higher paying occupations" the church will need to increase its role in adult education. With a direct focus on "minorities" one pastor wrote "I feel

the need for adult education will increase because of the lack of economic opportunities for people of color.” Furthermore, “Many people in the church not able to get good jobs because of not being able to read and follow instructions,” stated another pastor.

### **Church Role**

As the responses in this category suggest, the church has a responsibility to its members and the community. In other words, the church has a mandate to help people. One reason the church’s role will increase, according to one of the pastors is because “many community issues are being relegated to the church.” One pastor stated that “. . . the church has a responsibility to their community in making sure that the people are educated.” In the same vein, another pastor believes that the “church should address all of the needs and issues of its members.” The role will also increase “. . . because the church is becoming more involved with the issue that reflect members competency level and this is going to assist with higher education.” Additionally, “Pastors are becoming aware of the fact that the church must participate in training congregants” and “A lot of people look to the church now days, more and more for their needs.”

### **Individual/Group Needs**

This rubric reflects responses that are germane to individuals or groups of people. For example, one pastor indicated that he saw the church’s role increasing “Because the rapid changes in the family systems the church will be the only source of help in the future.” With a focus on older adults, one pastor believes that the fastest growing part of the population is older adults. As such, the needs and issues the church addresses have to be relevant for this population of learners. Within the same context, another pastor suggested, “As the church grows older, more [church] services and programs will be needed.” In relation to people in general, another pastor stated that “There are areas of adult education that either members cannot afford or time or distance from is a factor.” Finally, another pastor saw adults being forced to the church when he stated, “Survival and conformity will ultimately drive more & more individuals to churches for adult education.”

## **CONCLUSION**

As the above rubrics demonstrate pastors in urban churches believe the church’s role in adult education will increase. It would appear that our rapidly changing society is causing technology to play a more critical role in our lives and subsequently having either an adverse or positive impact on adult learners. Some pastors are cognizant of this fact and are taking a proactive approach in their response to it. When asked how they are going to meet the future educational needs, some pastors indicated that they have computer labs and one indicated that his church would provide distance education in the near future. Within urban areas, many adults cannot afford computers. Hence many may not be familiar with computers and thus require computer training. This, of course, expands the aperture of the digital divide. Declining resources, in particular governmental resources, are limiting social service agencies’ abilities to help those in need. As a result the church, regardless of the lack of external funding sources has to increase its educational role. This is significant, as it has been found that “churches in urban areas tend to receive more in offerings than churches in suburban and rural areas” (PR Newswire, 1998, paragraph 6). “There is a new stress on independence from government, foundation, and corporate funding and a new policy on the part of many religious organizations

to finance most of their activities through fund-raising campaigns and dues (Ramsey, 1998, p. 610). Hence, as outside resources are diminishing, the church can rely on its members to fill the financial gap and thus provide the necessary educational programs for its adult members. The lack of education and the perceived benefits derived by advanced education promote the need for adult education within the urban church. Some adults have not acquired the necessary educational skills they need to function in society. Thus, remedial education is needed. While education is not a panacea for all social or economic ills, it certainly places one in a better position versus an individual who lacks it. Within urban communities, many adults need training and education to get ahead in today's society. Hence, the church's educational role must not only continue, but it must also increase.

As with other entities, the church is impacted by the economy. However, based on comments from the pastors in the current study, a slow economy further enhances the church's role in adult education. In such an economy, job losses are common and people need to be trained or retrained. This is especially true in urban areas as unemployment is a recurring theme and contributes to crime and poverty. The church can assist learners by providing the necessary training to enable adults to live independently and above the poverty level. Historically, the church has provided adult education for African Americans. This may account for the perception that the ministers have regarding the church's accountability for adult education to its members and community. Another reason for the church's increased role is the church's historical responsible nature. As some pastors intimated, the church has a mandate to its members and its community. Thus, those churches in urban areas must help others. Family systems are changing and our population is getting older. If the Black church is true to its mission, it will provide educational programs to meet the ever-changing needs of society, but more importantly those of the individuals in urban areas.

Urban communities have experienced a decline in tax-based dollars because businesses, whites, and affluent African Americans have abandoned the urban centers. As a result many low-income people fill our inner cities. Moreover, our urban communities have witnessed a proliferation in crime, poverty, and unemployment. Urban areas are challenged to address the problems. The church is one entity that can provide solutions to the aberrant problems that are left behind when there is an exodus from the inner city. The urban Black church is the stronghold of the community. Thus, the church's educational programs serve as conduits to address a plethora of issues.

In general, it appears that the urban church's responsibility for adult education will increase. Within urban areas, thousands of people are losing their jobs, which, of course, affect the family, the economy, and education. Pastors seem to be aware of the need for more education of its adult members. Thus, the role and/or responsibilities of Christian educators may be affected as well. With the number of adults needing adult education, urban churches may find their buildings swelling with adult learners. They need to prepare themselves for the influx of learners.

Adult educators seeking to learn more about adult education can look to the church as a viable context for adult education research. Not only is it a good time now, but it will also be in the future. Pastors appear to realize the importance of adult education and the crucial role the church will have in providing it in the future. However, the proliferation of literature relative to adult education in the church appears to be nominal. In fact, a review of the literature reveals a

scant discussion on the topic of adult education in the Black church. The church's educational role cannot be ignored.

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