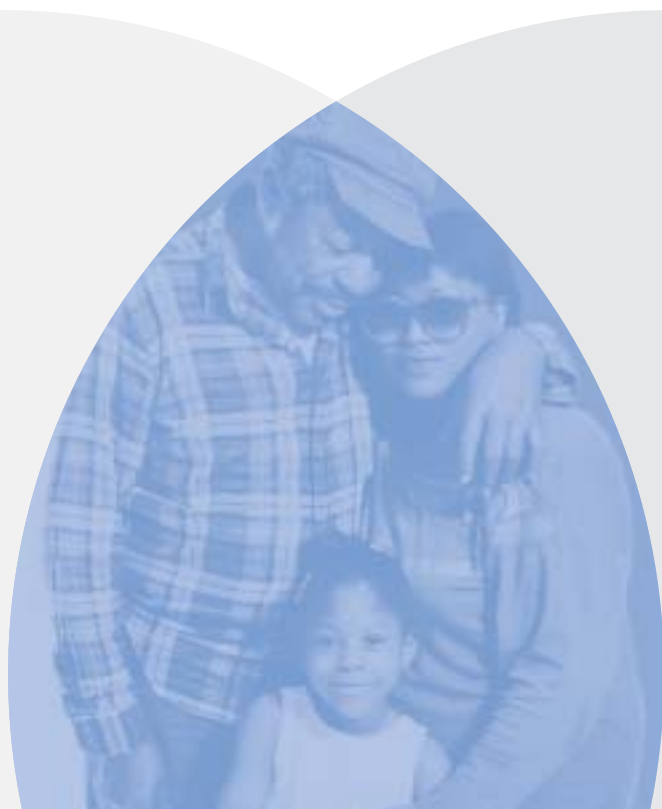


Healthy Marriages in Low-Income African-American Communities

Part 1: Exploring Partnerships between
Faith Communities and the Marriage Movement

A Thematic Summary
Prepared by Robert M. Franklin, Ph.D., Emory University



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A Thematic Summary

“The best way to reduce negative child outcomes is to strengthen our nation’s most vulnerable families and, in particular, to increase their ability to provide some real economic security for their kids.”

Douglas W. Nelson, President, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, *The High Cost of Being Poor* (2003).

Growing concern exists in the public and private sectors about the link between the large number of children growing up in poverty and the range of negative outcomes they face. Scholars also call attention to the fact that a higher percentage of children living in single parent households live in poverty compared with children living in two parent households. This has prompted many to reconsider the role of marriage as a social unit in which children tend to fare better. Other scholars raise critical questions about using marriage as a poverty alleviation strategy, especially when many married women are subject to abuse and violence. These households may have more financial resources, but no one benefits from encouraging or perpetuating abusive marriages. As a result, it is necessary to use the category of healthy marriage – a committed, lasting relationship where both adults feel safe and respected, and are capable of providing love and guidance to their children.

The 2004 Institute for American Values report *Can Government Strengthen Marriage? Evidence from the Social Sciences* offers this view. “Both adults and children are better off living in communities where more children are raised by their own two married parents. Both adults and children live longer, have higher rates of physical health and lower rates of mental illness, experience poverty, crime and domestic abuse less often, and have warmer relationships on average, when parents get and stay married.”

The Bush administration is making marriage promotion among low-income people a high priority on its social policy agenda. A host of privately run marriage promotion and enrichment organizations that serve primarily educated, suburban populations have now been enlisted to deliver marriage support services to poor and minority communities. Taken as a whole, these organizations give rise to what is referred to as the “marriage movement.” The movement currently enjoys high visibility, access, and influence in federal and state

policy-making circles. Some observers fear that segments of the marriage movement may translate their influence into policies that impose penalties on single mothers who do not, or who cannot, get married. There is a call for a more balanced approach that promotes and supports marriage, while also supporting single parents working towards self-sufficiency.

Both the federal government and the marriage movement have also vigorously encouraged faith communities to play a leading role in promoting marriage and reducing divorce. Less well known is the role that African-American churches and clergy play in promoting healthy marriage. And, no one knows how open and willing both black churches and the marriage movement are to exploring formal partnerships to increase and sustain healthy marriages in low-income communities.

During the summer of 2003, against this background, Paula Dressel and Carole Thompson, of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, initiated conversations with Robert M. Franklin about the status of marriage promotion in African-American Christian congregations. Franklin is a scholar on the African-American church and a professor at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. They invited Franklin to initiate research on the subject. In June 2003, he submitted the concept paper *Marriage in African-American Communities: A Conversation with Faith Leaders*. In the paper, Franklin proposed that the Casey Foundation convene two discrete consultative sessions. The first session would determine the nature and extent of marriage promotion and education activities currently available in many African-American congregations, with special emphasis on those serving low-income communities. The second session would provide African-American faith leaders with the opportunity to share their experiences and background with the marriage promotion field regarding what would be most effective and helpful in strengthening low-income African-American families.

Foundation staff created a gender-balanced research team and invited Dr. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, a sociologist from Colby College and a Baptist minister, to serve as co-moderator for the first session. They invited Reverend William Harris of Atlanta to record the proceedings.

The consultation involved approximately 50 people and included research, field interviews, and two meetings conducted in October and December 2003 at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The October meeting included a cross-section of African-American pastors and church leaders with experience in marriage promotion activities. The group identified existing church-based relationship-enhancing practices and obstacles to promoting marriage. They developed a list of concerns and opportunities pertaining to increasing the church's capacity to engage in this work.

The December meeting included a subset of the clergy group who met in October, as well as representatives of more than a dozen professional marriage promotion and education organizations, including several established by African-American professionals and that serve primarily African-American communities. The December meeting presented the findings of the October session and explored possible areas of collaboration between churches and marriage promotion organizations.

This report summarizes highlights of both the October and December consultative sessions, including recommendations generated by the participants. There is one appendix that appears at the end of the report providing a list of participants for both sessions.

the October Session

Talking about Building
Healthy Marriages and Families

1

Background

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Extensive scholarly and popular literature exists on the history, evolution and contemporary situation of African-American marriages and families. A somewhat smaller body of scholarship focuses on the role of faith communities in promoting and strengthening marriages and families in low-income neighborhoods. Although our purpose is not to summarize that literature, it may be useful to examine highlights that convey the urgency of devoting greater public and private sector attention to these issues.

- In 1890, 80 percent of African-American households were comprised of two parents. One hundred years later, only 40 percent of African-American children live in married-couple households.
- In 1970, 68 percent of African-American adults were married. Today, that number has dropped to 41 percent.
- In 1998, 64 percent African-American births were to unmarried women.

Amid growing concern about these and similar trends, on October 7 and 8, 2003, the Annie E. Casey Foundation convened a group of 13 ministers to identify ways African-American congregations are responding to the challenges of building healthy marriages and families in low-income communities. In preparation for the session, each participant received a summary of readings extracted from the book *Marriage: Just a Piece of Paper?* as well as materials describing the Foundation's approach to building stronger families and neighborhoods. The Foundation also provided a bibliography for further reading on this topic.

THE PARTICIPANTS

The 13 clergy who participated were a diverse and dedicated group of professionals. The six women and seven men came from areas of the nation with large populations of low-income African Americans – areas like Chicago, Atlanta, Detroit and Washington, D.C. – and from communities with smaller overall African-American populations, but noteworthy concentrations of poverty – like Los Angeles and Minneapolis. They represented a cross-section of the historical African-American denominations – Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal, Church of God in Christ – as well as mainline traditions with significant African-American membership – United Methodist – and independent congregations. All of the clergy were college educated, most with graduate theological or other professional degrees. Some were full-time senior pastors, while others were senior assistant ministers or bi-vocational pastors.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE OCTOBER CONSULTATION

Participants met for dinner the evening before the formal session. In his welcoming remarks, Foundation Senior Vice-President, Ralph Smith, raised several issues concerning the challenges faced by poor children, with special attention to the long-term implications of early school failure. His analysis of the link between under-performing school systems and an expanding criminal justice system provided a sobering reminder of the high stakes involved in “leaving no child behind.” He noted that although marriage wasn’t a panacea for the ills of low-income communities, healthy marriages and engaged fathers should be properly understood and supported as one among many important opportunities for increasing child outcomes and contributing to positive community transformation.

Participants’ introductory comments about their motivation for attending the session echoed Smith’s observations, suggesting the decline in marriage might be symptomatic of a larger decline in social trust, commitment and community in some African-American communities. Their perspectives were informed by experience working in various fields, including public education, community organization, mental health, criminal justice, family therapy, community economic development, domestic violence prevention, gender-role development and others.

Speaking to the challenges that pertain to increasing the pool of “marriageable” men, Pastor Leslie D. Braxton of the Mount Zion Baptist Church in Seattle (an historic middle-class congregation located in a working-class neighborhood) reports that one Sunday, he announced that the men in the church, as well as those in the neighborhood, were invited to gather on Monday evening to watch NFL football and to have dinner together. During the game’s half time, he started a discussion on the traits and responsibilities of a healthy man. So engrossed were they in the conversation that followed, the men decided to skip viewing the rest of the game and continued the discussion. At the end, they committed to returning on the following Monday night. Pastor Braxton reports that those discussions led to the development of mentoring relationships that have successfully coached young men on how to compete for, and retain, a job. This simple innovation in one local congregation proved to be successful in enlisting the active participation of both low-income and affluent men in a class-like setting aimed at strengthening their religious identity and their capacity to be better husbands and fathers.



Setting the Stage for Discussion

MARRIAGE PROMOTION MINISTRIES IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHURCHES: AN EMPIRICAL PERSPECTIVE

To provide a common body of information prior to participants addressing these questions, sociology professor, W. Bradford Wilcox from the University of Virginia, shared the findings of his research on religion, culture, marriage and family formation among African Americans residing in 20 cities with populations of more than 200,000 (*Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study* data).

- On most measures of religiosity (church attendance, faith practices and so on), African Americans rank highest.
- Sixty-two percent of married African-American urban mothers of infants attend church regularly, compared to 39 percent of unmarried African-American urban mothers.
- Urban mothers who attend church several times a month or more are 100 percent more likely to be married at the time of birth, compared to urban mothers who do not attend church frequently.ⁱ
- The link between religious attendance and marriage is strongest among African-American mothers.ⁱⁱ
- Despite the fact that urban mothers who attend church place a very high value on marriage, there appears to be an “African-American religion-family paradox” that involves the coexistence of “unusually high rates of church attendance and unusually low rates of marriage.”
- Only three percent of African-American churches in his sample offer formal programs in marriage and parenting, compared with 18 percent in the general population.
- Five percent offer programs targeting unmarried people – singles, single-parents and so on.

In his analysis, Wilcox suggests that church attendance plays a role in enhancing men’s appreciation for, and acceptance of, marriage and family responsibilities, as opposed to the more carefree lifestyle of many urban single men. Using a sociological lexicon, he refers to this as “domesticating” men, a term that generated considerable discussion. Several participants noted that “domestication” has

unfortunate connotations and prefer to describe what religion does for men in terms of “providing increased spiritual awareness of all the aspects of life that create a more mature person who, in turn, is a better marriage partner.”

THREE MAJOR APPROACHES TO MARRIAGE PROMOTION AND EDUCATION

Group moderators reviewed three major approaches to marriage promotion and education used by both professional marriage education organizations, like Marriage Savers and First Things First in Chattanooga, and by African-American congregations working with low-income people. Some of the strategies are described by Mathematica Policy Research in a paper titled *Helping Unwed Parents Build Strong and Healthy Marriages: A Conceptual Framework for Interventions* (January 2003). Others are based on a review of major studies of the black church and field interviews conducted by the co-moderators.

1. Marriage education and relationship skill building

Most marriage education organizations include classroom-based instruction (lectures, formal curricula, seminars and workshops) where the focus is on teaching relationship skills such as conflict resolution and effective communication. A variant of the classroom model is found in emotional/social support strategies that use small couple support group settings led by a mental health professional, where the goal is to share their concerns about emerging family issues.

2. Services to improve marriage skills

According to studies by C. Eric Lincoln, Lawrence Mamiya, Andrew Billingsley, Wallace Charles Smith and others, most African-American congregations sponsor ministries that serve non-members who reside in their neighborhoods. Many of these ministries promote the skills necessary for healthy marriages, such as employment, education, mental health assessments to deal with alcohol and drug addictions, and other life-skills. Most clergy do not speak explicitly of these initiatives as marriage-promoting, but readily acknowledge that the behavior and dispositions they promote are essential to healthy marriage and family formation. Researchers cited several programs, including the various male-mentoring and rites of passage

ministries of Reverends Jeremiah Wright, Jr., (Trinity United Church of Christ, Chicago), Johnny Ray Youngblood (St. Paul Community Baptist Church, Brooklyn), T. Garriott Benjamin (Light of the World Christian Church, Indianapolis), and Cecil Murray (First A.M.E. Church, Los Angeles).

3. Policy interventions

Some African-American clergy and community leaders, along with a variety of policy think tanks and academic researchers, are attentive to the evolving policy environment fostered by the passage of the 1996 welfare reform bill, which is, in short, more faith-friendly and private sector oriented. Some seek to embrace and promote its “charitable choice” provisions that could make it easier for faith-based ministries to receive federal funds for community social service delivery (e.g., Boston’s Ten Point Coalition). Others focus on the importance of not allowing the public sector to abdicate its legal responsibilities to promote the general welfare of its citizens, especially its least advantaged members (Congress of National Black Churches, Call to Renewal, etc.). The current debate about the government’s role in promoting marriage as a poverty alleviation strategy was acknowledged, along with the variety of black clergy perspectives on that debate.



The Discussion

Question 1

What features of the highlighted (marriage promotion and education) programs seem well suited or poorly suited to serve low-income African-American people?

THE VALUE OF PROGRAM STRATEGIES

Participants generally affirmed the value of educational, emotional support and employment promotion strategies. Classes for teaching relationship skills are likely to work well since most people are familiar with school-based formal instruction. Emotional support groups will be new to many low-income people, but may be effective

if led by sensitive and creative group leaders. Certainly, job training and placement skills are desired, especially if incentives like the promise of a job are provided. In general, participants affirmed the existing marriage promotion strategies, with one major caveat. The people who are to benefit must be permitted to inform those marriage promotion and education strategies (especially through focus groups, field tests and advisory groups). In other words, cultural competence is a non-negotiable feature of any successful program serving low-income people.

RELATIONSHIP PROMOTION PRACTICES IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHURCHES

In contrast to the relatively low percentage of formal marriage promotion and education programs in black churches cited earlier in the Wilcox research, participants identified several institutional practices that contribute to a culture of healthy relationships and marriages. They also emphasized that although a culturally competent effort to promote marriage among low-income communities is desirable, that approach will enjoy greater success if community leaders *first focus on reviving and creating a culture of healthy relationships, where every individual has the capacity to be “in relation”* (Reverend Willette Burgie). (The concept of “in relation” deserves greater theoretical and empirical investigation as it appears to be more encompassing than the popular concept and measures of “marriage skills.”) And, a “healthy relationship culture” should not focus solely on marriage, but needs to cover the spectrum of possible relationships – from friendship and dating to marriage and, when necessary, respectful, cooperative interaction following divorce – to ensure that the best interests of children remain central in each adult’s life.

Discussion highlights

- “Dating education” must become an explicit, high priority for marriage promotion efforts. As Pastor Jules Bagneris noted, “Our kids don’t know the difference between dating as innocent friendship and companionship, and dating to select a marriage partner. We’ve got to teach them the meaning of a date and that it doesn’t have to involve sex.”

- Programs that are well-suited for low-income African Americans must be affordable (registration for most programs costs hundreds of dollars), and use printed materials that are user-friendly and written in language that is engaging, lively and accessible to people who may not have completed high school.
- Most participants require parishioners to undergo premarital counseling before they will perform the wedding, and occasionally sponsored or supported trustworthy marriage enrichment opportunities of the sort described in the Mathematica conceptual framework (retreats, conferences, etc.). Discussion ensued about the class assumptions and biases built into the marriage education culture that relies on overnight lodging, time away from work, traveling great distances, hefty fees and other investments that might be prohibitive for poor people.
- A variety of “subliminal marriage promotion practices” exist that communicate pro-marriage values through more generalized rituals and programs. For instance, worship services that include the dedication, christening or baptism of infants are sometimes used to underscore the need for parents, other adults and the entire community to offer gifts to the child that will be necessary for a good life. Marriage and a reliable extended family are among those gifts. It should be noted that dedicating the babies of unwed parents is a controversial practice in many churches and participants reflected the spectrum of opinion on the practice.
- Some churches insist on post-marital counseling and provide “couples who care” as role models and lay counselors. The lay counseling program in one participant’s church began with lay people who were in crisis and on the verge of divorce who reached out to other similarly troubled couples.
- Many churches sponsor singles’ ministries, but almost invariably, they are disproportionately female. Male and female pastors, along with laywomen throughout the church want to know, “Where are the men?”

Question 2:

What are the important characteristics or components that should be included in a faith-based marriage promotion program? Should there be different programs for: older vs. younger couples, unwed mothers involved with a man other than the father of their child(ren), unwed fathers involved with a woman other than the mother of their child(ren), unwed parents still romantically involved, men and women who are not parents, singles, etc?

THE NEED FOR SPECIALIZED ATTENTION

Participants observed that many subgroups within the low-income population would require specialized and professional attention, much of it beyond the capacity of the average pastor or congregation to provide.

Discussion highlights

- In view of the importance of increasing the level of education for low-income people, many participants acknowledged the need to provide more vigorous assistance to people seeking to acquire their GED, and to pursue additional education.
- Although it would be ideal to sponsor programs and services for each targeted subgroup, most smaller and storefront congregations don't have the capacity to do this. The lack of adequate staffing, space and financial resources constrains these congregations that are often located in the most distressed neighborhoods and, consequently, have the most promising access to under-served populations.
- African-American pastors must be cautious about collaborating with programs designed for majority audiences. Some marriage promotion organizations may wish to influence the political dispositions of African-American clergy. More importantly, pastors risk losing their "*pastoral capital*" in the process of partnering with, or being funded by, politically conservative entities that historically have not been sensitive to the needs of poor and minority people. The notion of "*pastoral capital*" elicited strong opinions about the dangers of collaborations that fail to perform due diligence on the sponsoring organization.

- By fault of the disproportionate percentage of African-American men who are incarcerated or under the supervision of the criminal justice system, effective programs must regard them as redeemable and educable for marriage and family responsibility. More churches could collaborate to offer a comprehensive menu of supports for inmates and former inmates. Typically, congregations limit themselves to prison visitation and worship, but provide direct support (job placement, housing and so on) only to people known or connected through their members.
- Clergy need specialized training to address the general question of marriage preparation, and the distinctive needs of populations specified by the second question. This point comes from a paper distributed to participants at the session and prepared by Reverend Michael C.R. Nabors (New Calvary Baptist Church, Detroit). He calls attention to the general lack of adequate education provided by seminaries, and the lack of opportunities for professional and personal development to help future pastors deal with these challenges. Consequently, in some denominations, clergy divorce rates exceed the divorce rate in the general population.

Throughout the day, participants demonstrated an awareness of how the “marriage conversation” is lodged within the complex interplay of individual realities, community values and social structural dynamics.

Question 3:

What are the relevant policy issues that currently face unwed couples in the existing political climate? (For example, TANF eligibility for unwed parents, public housing, repeal of marriage taxes at the low-income level, denial or suspension of driving privileges for non-payment of child support, etc. What features of church practice and policy are relevant to this issue?)

RELEVANT POLICY ISSUES

Many clergy were unaware of the most recent developments on Capital Hill related to welfare reform and using marriage as a poverty alleviation policy. Ron Haskins of the Brookings Institution, an observer at the session, provided background on policy initiatives and proposals. In particular, he called attention to the fact that more than \$1 billion would be invested in marriage promotion and education,

strengthening fatherhood and other family promotion strategies. He urged those who find current marriage promotion and education programs unsatisfactory to consider developing their own.

Discussion highlights

- Given the important nexus between work and transportation, public transportation authorities must be challenged to look at how their schedules and services penalize poor people who may live in distant and often, high crime neighborhoods. Working poor people need and deserve more transportation services.
- Some participants spoke of male parishioners who avoid visiting their children because their child support arrears seem impossible to resolve. The children are innocent victims of enforcement policies that are well-intentioned and try to collect money that these men rightfully owe to mothers and children, but in effect, drive many men further away. Other participants commented on how men who are determined to “beat the system” of child support use any means and any convenient excuse to avoid compliance.
- The federal government should avoid going further to promote marriage. The realities in low-income minority communities suggest that a large percentage of African-American women will never marry. Consequently, the lion’s share of resources should not be committed to promoting marriage at the expense of assisting single mothers become self-sufficient.

OBSTACLES WITHIN THE CULTURE OF THE CONGREGATION

Participants also identified obstacles that exist within the culture of the black church and that are in the way of advancing the marriage conversation.

Discussion highlights

- Many congregations adhere to a double standard of sexual morality. Unwed mothers are often required to apologize for moral failure publicly before the congregation and request reinstatement of their membership. Similar requirements are not usually imposed on the male. Occasionally, churches demand that the young man “do the right thing” and marry the woman. But, as one participant candidly reflected on her own experience, many elders are reluctant “to

compound one mistake with another,” namely, promoting bad marriages to solve the problem of non-marital pregnancy.

- Often the messages delivered by male clergy from the pulpit are in direct contradiction with what the congregation knows to be the personal experience of the pastor and “the first family.” This is especially complicated and sensitive when clergy have been the subject of a public scandal.
- Some churches and pastors continue to propagate a gospel of “soft patriarchy,” hoping to re-establish the traditional, Western model of the nuclear family, with husband as breadwinner, and wife as mother at home with children. This is despite the reality that African-American women worked outside the home long before their white counterparts viewed it as a vehicle for their liberation.
- Many black churches manifest a “conspiracy of silence” on sensitive issues like sexual activity, sexual orientation and pastoral infidelity. United Methodist missionary and attorney Lydia Cincore Templeton refers to this as the “hush-hush syndrome.”
- Many churches seem to condone the unfair treatment of gay and lesbian people who are often highly visible and talented church workers, but tend to be exploited because of limited employment alternatives. Also, their sexual orientation is either condemned in humiliating ways, or they are rendered invisible as the “hush-hush” culture dictates. Some theological tensions surfaced among participants who hold differing perspectives on the ethics of homosexual identity.
- Cohabitation is rarely addressed but may be a growing phenomenon as parishioners simply “get away with it,” thanks to church silence and indifference.
- Dr. Stephanie Boddie called attention to class cleavages in the African-American community by citing research undertaken by Dr. Drew Smith and the Morehouse Leadership Center – a project supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Smith found that when public housing residents were in urgent need of immediate assistance, they chose the first church they could find that provided the kind of services they needed. But when looking for a place to worship, public housing residents tended to go to a congregation outside their community where their financial status was not known or considered. Reverend Aretta-Rie Johnson (Resurrection Temple Church) noted that those same churchgoers do not return to the “helping congregation” after the crisis abates.



Recommendations

Participants explored ways they could contribute to the momentum of the marriage promotion and education movement among low-income African Americans. They developed a list of 11 recommendations.

- Congregations need to intensify and expand their efforts to prevent out-of-wedlock births, since the presence of a child or children significantly reduces the likelihood that a young single mother will marry in the future.
- Pastors need training in the broad field of family and marriage policy and promotion. Dr. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes also notes that going forward, “clergy are going to be called on to interpret all sorts of social science and policy information, sometimes packaged in ways that over-emphasize black people’s weaknesses and mask their strengths and complexities.ⁱⁱⁱ Becoming sophisticated advocates for healthy family adaptations to which policy-makers are insensitive is a new requirement for church leaders, and it will require a new interdependence among clergy and laity” and a new educational imperative.
- Churches must deal with the “poisonous soup” of popular culture, especially “gangsta” hip-hop lyrics and lifestyles that promote violence, and the sexual exploitation and degradation of women. This influence is complicating the prospects for reviving a culture of healthy dating.
- Greater attention must be given to protecting and counseling women who live in precarious and dangerous circumstances. The church must become more vocal about issues of domestic violence. The Faith Trust Institute of Seattle has an impressive curriculum and teaching aids for clergy and congregations working on domestic violence.
- Since pastors cannot accomplish all of the marriage promotion work that needs to be done, lay leadership must be trained and commissioned to provide leadership and services in this area.
- Congregations must be willing to collaborate with others to avoid duplicating services and wasting precious resources. This will challenge many congregations that fear losing members to churches with attractive programs.

- Effective programs will have to acknowledge the significance of Biblical sources for marriage and family norms and demonstrate a similar form of “cultural competence” in serving people who expect to have such norms validated by scripture.
- Congregations need to clarify precisely what a “prophetic voice” or stance might say about this complex and sensitive set of issues. African Americans and, indeed, the larger society, have come to expect that African-American churches and clergy will provide a prophetic analysis and vision of what God requires for good and just human communities.
- Marriage promotion as a component of the problems of overall black family life may need to be addressed in partnership with organizations like the Urban League, the National Council of Negro Women, the Children’s Defense Fund and black fraternities and sororities. Such an effort wouldn’t be the first time that African Americans are challenged to reach across and around class and status lines to address the emergencies of African-American life.
- A series of leadership summit meetings on marriage and family should be convened by the philanthropic sector. Summit meetings should gather denominational leaders, scholars and secular nonprofit organization representatives to develop strategies for reversing the troubling trends for black families. (Nabors)
- Participants in this consultative session should prepare a position paper that expresses their sense of urgency about, and commitment to, addressing marriage and family distress in low-income African-American communities.

the December Session

Continuing the Discussion

2



Background

ADDING INSIGHT THROUGH MARRIAGE PROMOTION ORGANIZATIONS

Following the October meeting, Foundation staff and the consultant evaluated the session and implemented plans for the second meeting. The planning group re-convened a subset of the clergy group prior to the December consultation to review and discuss the recommendations generated by the entire group at the October meeting. These recommendations were then shared and discussed with the marriage field practitioners.

In preparation for the December meeting, Franklin was asked to undertake a brief field scan to identify a group of marriage promotion organizations and professionals who would be promising dialogue partners with the faith leaders.

Methodology for field scan

- Conducting an Internet scan using key words such as “marriage promotion,” “low-income African Americans” and “marriage education organizations.”
- Using a directory compiled by the Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education (CMFCE) that contains over 150 organizations.
- Reviewing the Mathematica Policy Research framework and extracting all of the organizations identified as “faith-based,” “serving singles” and “serving single parents.”
- Asking African-American clergy and professors in the social sciences to identify African Americans working in this field.

- Conferring with several experts in the field to solicit their shortlist of most promising programs. Among the experts consulted were: Ron Mincy (Professor, Columbia University), Robin Dion (Senior Researcher, Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.), Bill Coffin (Special Assistant for Marriage Education, AFC, Department of Health and Human Services), Don S. Browning (Professor of Religion and Social Sciences, University of Chicago Divinity School), Theodora Ooms (Senior Researcher, Center for Law and Social Policy), and Reverend George Young (Holy Temple Baptist Church, Oklahoma).

In general, the marriage promotion field appears to be a cultural product of suburban, college-educated white Americans, most of which are friendly to religion. After eliminating programs that did not appear to serve urban, multi-class and multiracial populations, the list shrank from more than 200 to 21 organizations, including seven led by African Americans. After conferring with experts in the field, the list was further narrowed to 14. Franklin contacted these 14 organizations and all of them responded to the researcher's e-mail and phone inquiry regarding their activities, experience and insight on issues.

THE PARTICIPANTS

Based on an analysis of responses to the initial inquiry and some follow-up conversations, the Casey Foundation invited 14 organizations, in addition to representatives of the October participants, to attend the December consultation session. The participants included 14 marriage education professionals, eight African-American clergy, Foundation staff and consultants, representatives from the Administration for Children and Families (HHS) and scholars on the African-American family, such as Dr. Robert Hill (WESTAT) and Dr. Linda Malone-Colon (Hampton University). For a list of attendees, refer to the appendix.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE DECEMBER CONSULTATION

On the evening of December 11, 2003, consultation participants gathered at the Foundation for an opening dinner and discussion.

Once again, Foundation Senior Vice-President Ralph Smith welcomed participants, then introduced the guest speaker, Dr. Wade F. Horn, Assistant Secretary for the Administration for Children and Families of the Department of Health and Human Services. Horn outlined the Administration's plan and perspective for marriage promotion.

Following his presentation, participants voiced concerns about government activism in marriage promotion. Specifically, one pastor indicated he felt insulted by government efforts to promote marriage, while simultaneously cutting jobs and assistance to people transitioning from welfare to work and school. The Reverend Leslie Braxton of Seattle challenged Horn vigorously to express this sentiment to President Bush at the earliest opportunity.

The evening concluded with remarks from Paula Dressel, director of the Foundation's Planning, Research and Development Unit (PRDU), who echoed the pastors' concerns that, "We need to offer the best guidance we can for families under siege from poverty, stress and struggle."

Facilitator Sharon Adams started the following day's session by reviewing the agenda and guidelines for having a productive conversation with a large group. Dr. Franklin provided an overview of the pastor's concerns and recommendations developed in October.



Setting the Stage for Discussion

THE ADMINISTRATION'S PERSPECTIVE AND PLAN FOR MARRIAGE PROMOTION

In the previous evening's presentation, Dr. Horn, Assistant Secretary for the Administration for Children and Families of the Department of Health and Human Services, echoed the challenge facing the consultation participants by noting that, "Those of us who really care about the future and prospects for low-income children really have to confront this issue. So many children live in single parent, single income families and the anecdotes and data are compelling. We have no social policy in play that is powerful enough to lift those children out of poverty. In many respects, what brings us here is to figure out ways to work on this issue that are culturally competent, appropriate, and respectful to communities in which some of us live and some of us serve."

Prior to joining the Bush Administration, Horn was a longstanding advocate for father involvement in the lives of children. He noted that he learned from experience what government ought not to do. For instance, government should not: try to coerce people to get married, engage in stigmatizing and lecturing people about marriage, take part in matchmaking, especially if it might inadvertently trap people in abusive relationships, or retreat from providing adequate supports to single parent families.

Horn observed that "children live in single-parent, as well as two-parent households, and every child deserves to be supported and encouraged." Some pastors observed that Horn would do well to communicate this message more aggressively to the conservative segments of the faith community who may wish to use policy to penalize single parents. He went on to describe an Administration for Children and Families initiative to develop marriage promotion strategies for African-American communities that recognize and address cultural sensitivities and the uniqueness of the African-American community. Administration for Children and Families staff was included among the invited marriage promotion representatives. "It's true that if you take two people not working and they get married and are still not working, they are still poor.

So we believe work and work supports are the mechanism for overcoming poverty, but there is good reason to believe marriage is relevant to reducing poverty.”

Administration goals

- Develop demonstration projects that illustrate effective collaboration between key community sectors including local government, business, civic and nonprofit organizations.
- Emphasize marriage in various federal programs including Refugee Resettlement, the Children’s Bureau, Community Services and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).
- Conduct research on the efficacy of various programmatic approaches to marriage promotion and strengthening.
- Provide training in this somewhat uncharted field for Administration for Children and Families staff.

Although marriage may be in a state of crisis throughout American society, Horn stresses that African-American families are less likely to have access to marriage education services and less likely to be able to purchase them. “What we need to do is make sure marriage education services are accessible and co-located in the same communities. Regardless of socioeconomic status, conflict is inevitable. What is not, is how couples manage it.”



Refined Recommendations

The recommendations brought forward by pastors in October 2003 were refined further by the faith leaders subcommittee during a working session prior to the December meeting. Dr. Franklin provided this summary of the pastor's concerns and recommendations prior to the group discussions.

Training and skills development

- Create incentives for clergy and laity to become active in marriage promotion activities.
- Provide accredited training in marriage and family services delivery to clergy, making use of scholarships, subsidies and incentives for participation.
- Ensure that service providers are capable of diagnosing unhealthy marriages and are acquainted with a variety of options for assistance.
- Provide tailored training and long-term support for small congregations that wish to become proactive in marriage promotion.

Service delivery

- Develop programs and recruitment strategies that are sensitive to the stigma of seeking assistance for marriage enrichment.
- Develop an approach to marriage and family services that coheres around a "continuum of services and care."
- Provide counseling and support for people undergoing marital separation and dissolution.

Knowledge development, research and orientation

- Demonstrate awareness of the systemic dimension of individual, marriage and family challenges in low-income communities.
- Address the lack of marriageable men in low-income communities as a key issue in understanding family issues.
- Ensure that programmatic objectives are transparent (identifiable), measurable and feasible.
- Invite African-American researchers and service providers to design, implement, direct and evaluate programs and services.

- Conduct information-gathering processes (town hall meetings, focus groups, “listening sessions,” etc.) to solicit input and recommendations from target populations prior to program development. Employ a similar strategy for evaluation and feedback.
- Field test relationship inventory instruments.
- Understand the specific cultural nuances in contemporary African-American youth culture (hip hop and others) and avoid making premature negative judgments about elements of that subculture.
- Expand the concept of “cultural competence” to include the significance of spiritual resources and grounds for marriage and family norms. Adopt materials accordingly.

Advocacy

- Beyond demonstrating awareness of cultural and systemic issues, marriage promotion organizations should publicly address the impact of public policy on marriage skills and the capacity to sustain marriages (e.g. via op-ed newspaper articles and other modes of public communication).
- Develop and/or support the emergence of interfaith coalitions that assist in adapting and reality-testing marriage promotion in religiously diverse communities.

An urgent call to African-American churches

- Intensify and expand efforts to prevent out-of-wedlock pregnancies. Some progress has been made in this area but considerably more is needed.
- Seek training in the broad field of marriage and family resources, promotion and policy to become more informed advocates for healthy families.
- Engage in dialogue with various entities, such as young people, other churches, hip-hop artists, entertainment industry power-brokers, etc., on the negative influence of popular culture, especially lyrics and the lifestyle they promote.
- Oppose abusive and violent behavior in all relationships.
- Seek opportunities to collaborate with other churches, religious communities and secular entities to ensure the quality of services, and avoid duplication and poor stewardship of precious resources.



The Discussion

Question 1:

Based on the issues and recommendations that have been shared, what are the challenges and opportunities for reviving and creating a culture of healthy relationships in low-income African-American communities?

NEW ISSUES/DIMENSIONS OF IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES

Each group affirmed the value of the concerns and challenges raised by the faith leaders. Since considerable overlap existed in the groups' identification of challenges, attention was focused on new issues or dimensions of previously cited issues.

Discussion highlights

- Participants critically examined the concept of “marriage skills,” noting that the term could suggest that some people are unfit, when they may simply be unready for a committed relationship. Efforts should be intensified to avoid terms and descriptive language that convey unintended negative judgments or stigmas.
- Participants emphasized that it was important not to “over-individualize” the challenges of marriage in contemporary society. Instead, community leaders and marriage professionals should “name the systems and the cultural context” that contribute to, if not cause, delay of marriage and marital disruption. Further, these leaders should be proactive regarding educating the public and their local communities about how these systems complicate their lives. Indeed, often marriage and mutual commitments of any kind are counter-cultural and require enormous courage, faith and maturity.
- A few of the African-American marriage professionals noted that the traditional model of the authoritarian church, with a male pastor presiding over a female majority of parishioners, may pose challenges for modeling a more egalitarian, open approach to healthy relationships and marriage.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR REVIVING/CREATING A CULTURE OF HEALTHY MARRIAGES

Discussion highlights

- Evidence (social scientific and anecdotal) exists to suggest that young people value spirituality and are curious about values. Youth culture reflects an interest in authenticity and “keeping it real.” Youth want and need to be listened to by adults in the church and community. They need to hear testimonies about the “healing power of relationships” and how couples can remain married over time. This listening has implications for how local congregations organize their ministries to youth. Unilateral communication (preaching to them without listening) will not work for the current generation. Unfortunately, this is the approach many churches take to inculcating religious knowledge and truth.
- As churches and other sectors engage in developing and promoting a useful theology of healthy sexuality, it may be wise to re-examine traditional African and African-American cultural resources. Although many of these communities are patriarchal and hierarchical, many others promote an attractive example of male-female partnership, leadership roles for women, and collective (village and neighborhood) responsibility for the rearing of children.
- Some participants noted that smaller churches have a strategic advantage in the work required ahead. They are well positioned to serve and support low-income people. But, as noted in the pastor’s list, smaller churches are hampered by resource constraints and a lack of training and skills for this particular area of need. Several marriage promotion representatives readily identified examples of how their curricula are used by congregations in low-income minority communities. The group was encouraged that this gap could be filled by existing or easy-to-develop resources. In the absence of external funding sources, whether public or philanthropic, some pastors suggest that affluent churches could play a role in providing support for this training. This would require congregation partnerships that link resource-rich churches with resource-challenged churches. The New Testament offers concrete examples and a theological rationale for this kind of linkage and mutual responsibility.

Participants also underscore the importance of disseminating the following messages.

- Clergy do not have to do all of the heavy lifting. The lion's share of the work will be done by laypeople.
- Simple weddings can be beautiful and of value for the entire community. No one should be discouraged from marrying due to the cultural pressure to “stage a major production” or achieve an “*Ebony* magazine wedding.” We all must educate interested couples and singles to value the pleasures and meaningfulness of less elaborate events.
- Celebrate, publicize and learn from the strong, lasting marriages that are already present in the community. These “elders” have wisdom that others need to hear. One innovative model in Atlanta involves collecting oral histories and presenting them to community audiences. Julie Rainbow, an African-American educator, artist, and activist has published a book, titled *Standing the Test of Time*, in which she presents marriages that work and why.

Dynamics of the Marriage Promotion Movement

Franklin then offered reflections on the structure and dynamics of the “marriage promotion movement.” He noted that other modern mass movements, like the civil rights movement, labor movement and women’s liberation movement, have been essential for the liberation of oppressed people. Social movements complement the work of legal and policy reform and may accelerate their progress. In particular, scholars of the civil rights movement note that it succeeded, in part, because it facilitated the coordinated activities of a variety of leadership styles, from charismatic leaders who are visionaries (Dr. King) to bureaucratic leaders who work diligently behind the scenes (Thurgood Marshall) to grassroots leaders who organize and mobilize people (Ella Baker). “I see the emergence of a movement here,” he suggested, “and 10 years from today we are going to look back and say that we were part of this moment in history. You all are convening and attending the early meetings that will help launch something hopeful for children and adults.”

Franklin suggested the “marriage field” has certain characteristics, namely, it is “young, somewhat narrowly focused on the quality of relationships but open to expanding its analysis, research-driven, staffed by passionate people, relatively under-evaluated or untested, and emerging as a major force in American public policy and society.”

Franklin observed that the field coheres around a few core values, such as interdependence, self-sufficiency and emotional resiliency. “There is a moral dimension to marriage education,” he said. “For some organizations in the field, that moral dimension is explicit, for others it’s an implicit commitment. It may be useful to acknowledge that moral dimension when working with faith communities in a pluralistic society.”

Franklin also identified target populations served by marriage education and identified limitations and needs going forward.

Target populations served

- Inmates
- Immigrants and refugees
- At-risk and other youth
- People with developmental disabilities
- The military
- Doctors
- Lawyers
- Cancer patients
- Social workers
- Business professionals and others

Limitations and needs going forward

- Minority researchers
- Culturally competent educational products
- Collaboration with scholars and the rich resources present in historically black colleges and universities
- Evidence-based research on African-American marriages
- More diverse staffs
- Role models with whom low-income African Americans can identify

Question 2:

Do you see possibilities for collaboration among faith communities, marriage promotion organizations, and scholars in marriage and family studies?

A VARIETY OF POSSIBILITIES FOR COLLABORATION

Participants affirmed a variety of possibilities for productive collaboration. They noted that local leaders in cities could be encouraged to create interfaith, multidisciplinary coalitions that include social service agencies designed to affirm the value of marriage. This might resemble a version of the Marriage Savers' effective efforts in organizing city-wide, public-private marriage coalitions. Also, more attention should be given to developing media strategies that make the case for healthy marriage using popular celebrities who have influence with African-American youth.

Some participants highlighted the importance of using the potential political leverage of the proposed citywide coalitions to link marriage promotion directly to a larger public policy agenda that addresses substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, unemployment, homelessness, incarceration and re-entry. This would involve a conceptual shift from regarding marriage as a purely private phenomenon to placing marriage promotion within the larger context of a holistic approach to public health. Therein, healthy marriages and relationships reflect the health of the cultural and institutional environment of the entire community.

Participants identified the following topics as ones that faith community leaders and the marriage movement could productively collaborate on.

- **Prepare user-friendly fact sheets and talking points** to get this issue onto the radar screens of key opinion leaders who are needed to raise public awareness.
- **Funding for training local marriage leaders** to ensure that low-income neighborhoods have an informed resource person available.
- **Include community colleges in the collaboration** to ensure ongoing institutional support for implementation. In some communities, the colleges and schools may be more neutral sites for recruiting a diverse population to marriage education classes.

- **Ensure that relationship and marriage education begin in prisons and continue as people re-enter neighborhoods.**
- **Partner with health care providers** to reach both parents at the time of pregnancy and/or delivery. The Fragile Families research project refers to this as the “magic moment” for focusing on marriage promotion with young unmarried parents.
- **Establish a 15-year marriage and family commission** charged with monitoring the progress of the community in promoting healthy relationships.
- **Explore the role of African-American national denominations** in supporting this work at the local level.
- **Develop ample opportunities for volunteers** and non-professionals to get involved.
- **Be certain to acknowledge generational differences** in attitudes and assumptions about marriage. Be sure that older volunteers do not impose their assumptions and on young people.
- **Consider making marriage promotion a component in the Foundation's “Making Connections” communities.**
- **Promote Black Marriage Day (March 28)** as an annual occasion for valuing marriages, similar to Mother’s Day and Father’s Day. This tradition was started by participant Nisa Muhammad of the Wedded Bliss Foundation and has been cited favorably in national African-American magazines, such as Essence.
- **Link marriage promotion activities** to other familiar occasions and events, such as Women’s History Month, Black History Month, Black Justice Day, Take Back Your Marriage Month, etc.
- **Consider using the report on this consultation as the basis for a publication** that could further raise consciousness among college and graduate students, and others.

Question 3:

Based on the day's dialogue, what will you take away and do to raise awareness about the nature, benefits and challenges of marriage for low-income communities?

POSITIVE COMMENTS AND PERSONAL COMMITMENT

Participants offered a range of positive comments and pledges. Some participants indicated they would write news articles and editorials, connect with community colleges, plan new class topics for their local churches, observe Black Marriage Day and personally take advantage of marriage counseling. Several noted that due to the relentless schedules and burdens of labor in ministry, they often feel isolated when they promote healthy marriage. The consultative session helped them feel less alone.

Sharon Adams thanked participants for observing the guidelines for respectful communication in large gatherings. "In your hearts you believe marriage is an important part of helping children become healthy and stable. We are on that road and are going to get there. Thank you for your heartfelt, intellectual and on-the-ground participation."

Carole Thompson concluded the session by noting that similar conversations among clergy, government officials and marriage movement professionals should occur in local communities, noting that, "Despite the misgivings of some people, we feel compelled to allow local clergy and other community leaders to speak for themselves and to listen to their perspectives on promoting family formation. And, so far, we have heard them say they would like assistance in strengthening their capacity to educate, counsel and promote healthy marriages and families."

Conclusion

3

America's 65,000 African-American churches are the most valuable institutional assets that exist in low-income minority communities. They possess vast human capital in the form of potential armies of volunteers and talented leaders. They control significant financial capital in the form of land, buildings, property, a weekly cash flow and relationships with financial institutions. And, they are centers of social capital, where networks of care, information, education, inspiration and hope are nurtured. If they can be mobilized to promote healthy marriages in low-income communities, the lives of many children could be improved. The consultations indicate that many churches are interested and some are engaged in a variety of pro-marriage activities. This is a hopeful finding.

Also, we found that African-American clergy are open to exploring partnerships with the marriage movement. The forms of "partnership" will vary depending on the needs and interests of clergy and congregations, and on the usefulness, accessibility and affordability of marriage promotion resources and technical assistance. What's important is that now we know the door is open to continue the conversation and relationship building.

All American families and communities struggle against broad structural and cultural forces such as individualism, materialism and consumerism that threaten to unravel families. Low-income African Americans face unique challenges and will require the patient and sensitive guidance and support churches are capable of providing. It is important for the American public to appreciate the magnitude of the challenges ahead for poor families, and be prepared to provide the support necessary to lift more children out of poverty.

We began this report with the words of Foundation president, Douglas W. Nelson, and conclude with his call to action in a 2003 *Kids Count* essay. "Meeting this challenge will require unprece-

dedented public and private commitment: national, state and local collaboration; and policies, programs and resource allocations that are both complementary and reinforcing. Though difficult, we believe it can be done. Over the past decade, our nation mustered the will, policies and resources to move millions of parents into the workforce. Now let's apply that same level of determination and focus to the challenge of moving them – and their kids – out of poverty and closer to real financial security."

"Nothing worth doing can be completed in a lifetime, therefore, we must be saved by hope. And, nothing that is true, or good, or beautiful makes complete sense in any immediate context of history. Therefore, we must be saved by faith. And, no action, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone. Therefore, we must be saved by love." Reinhold Niebuhr

"Again and again we were told in church that once we crossed the threshold of this holy place sanctified by divine spirit, we were all one. As a child, I did not know who the poor were among us. I did not understand that as a family of seven children and two adults living on one working-class income, when it came to the issue of material resources, we were at times poor. Sharing resources was commonplace in our world – a direct outcome of a belief in the necessity of claiming the poor as ourselves. Indeed, showing solidarity with the poor was essential spiritual work, a way to learn the true meaning of community and enact the sharing of resources that would necessarily dismantle hierarchy and difference."^{iv} bell hooks



End Notes

i W. Bradford Wilcox, *Then Comes Marriage? Religion, Race, and Marriage in Urban America* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania—Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, 2002), p. 17.

ii *Ibid.* p. 22.

iii For instance, the discussion of marriage promotion is tied to the high proportion of out-of-wedlock births among African Americans at the same time there is little or no discussion of the extremely low married birth rate among more highly educated and affluent married women. For a discussion of the deeper complexity around black family issues see Robert B. Hill and Andrew Billingsley, *Research on the African-American Family: A Holistic Perspective* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1993).

iv bell hooks, *Class and the Politics of Living Simply*, in *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York: Routledge Press, 2000, p. 39).



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