

Youth and Religion Project

Module 1

The Black Church as the Village It Takes to Raise a Child

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By all accounts, African Americans are the most religious group in the U.S. They go to church more often, spend more time there, and donate more money than any other American subpopulation. They pray and read the Bible more. They are also more likely to claim that religion matters for them. (They score higher on the self-estimated "salience of religion" scale.) What Y&RP heard from the African American students who participated in our focus groups is consistent with these generalizations: most of them are religious enthusiasts. Indeed, by most measures, African Americans are one of the most religious peoples in the world.

We do not claim to understand fully why this is so, but one reason goes back to the fact that religious expression, including prayer and song, was one of the few ways that an enslaved people were able to hang on to their humanity under dehumanizing conditions. Religious media could also be used to communicate urgent secular messages. (Many references to "water" and the "river" referred not only to baptism but also to escape routes.) Beginning with emancipation and the rise of segregation, religious institutions became a preserve of the black public, indeed for most African American communities the only institution they controlled. Eventually, community life in the rural south centered in the Black church, and just about everyone was involved in the church in one way or another, regardless of their personal piety.

Following the Great Migration from the rural south to the urban north, religion remained a central institution of the black community, but individual religious involvement became more a matter of choice and less something that was socially enforced. In the cities, it was possible to escape the scrutiny of the community, especially for young men. Rates of African American religious participation remained high, but were nonetheless lower in northern cities than in the south. Yet for this very reason--religion was less universal--churches became even more important for the health and well-being of those who did participate in them. Churches remain the single most important way that individuals are connected to the Black community.

In sum, religion greatly matters for urban blacks, but as in the case of other immigrant groups, it has become less something that can be taken for granted and more something that has to be worked at. Urban blacks also have more than their share of people at the socio-economic margins, which is where religion matters most for promoting positive outcomes for young people.

Precisely where young people are underprivileged, religious involvement can make the biggest difference in their capacity to take advantage of opportunities and skirt dangers.

With these facts in mind, Y&RP conducted a case study of a church that we took to be exemplary of the Black Church tradition in the urban north, a church that emerged from our month-long canvass of African American congregations in Chicago in summer 2000. Many of the founding generation of the church, now in their retirement years, have rural southern roots, and they are being succeeded by an urban-born generation some of whom are rising into the middle class but some of whom are in jeopardy of losing what their forbears gained. To symbolize the stress the church places on solidarity across the generations, we'll call it One Accord Missionary Baptist Church.

Y&RP researchers spent several months looking in on various aspects of life in and around One Accord. We went to worship services, Sunday School classes, prayer meetings, baptisms, and the annual pageant in observance of Black History Month. We went to a summer picnic and joined with church members in a visit to another church where their pastor preached and their men's choir performed. We interviewed the pastor and several of the youth workers. The most intensive part of our research was the month we spent with each of two different church families, in their homes and going with them to church events, to see the church and its activities from the point of view of its members--parents and children alike.

The first thing to say about One Accord (and churches like it) is how much goes on there. A medium-sized church with one full-time pastor and about three hundred people regularly attending, One Accord offers Sunday School, morning worship and evening worship on most Sundays, sometimes with a midday dinner. There is usually a Bible study on Wednesdays and a prayer meeting on Fridays. Deacons, ushers, choirs, and men's and women's groups meet on Mondays and Saturdays. It is not unusual for members of a family to spend all day in church on Sunday--up to ten hours--and to return one or two nights during the week for other activities. (One Accord is also a site for many non-religious activities: the church runs a city-sponsored summer jobs program for youth and it regularly serves as a Cook County polling place. They also have an instructional computer lab and midweek study hall.) With all the ways of being involved, an absence from any one of them is seldom a make-or-break matter. The second thing to say about One Accord is that its religious activities are pitched to different levels of ability and interest, so that

there's always something for everybody. The third thing to mention is the intergenerational ethic that worship and Sunday School are for everyone, not just worship for grownups and Sunday School for kids. The most important thing to say about One Accord--something that makes the rest of it possible--is that parents are not solely responsible for their children at church: the church is a safe place for young people, who are looked after by their elders and peers and who themselves look after their juniors. In many ways, One Accord acts as the proverbial village that it is said to take to raise a child.

Something for everyone. Beginning with worship, there are features to satisfy every taste within the typical 2 to 3 hour service. Prayer and preaching are, of course, central, but they are not solely top-down and, although many members take notes on sermons, they are not just for the cerebrally inclined. It is expected that a prayer from the pulpit or a sermon will be accompanied by the people's own praise ("Yes, Lord" and "We praise your holy name") and words of encouragement ("Preach it," "All right"). The air is thick with vocalizations but the atmosphere is not stuffy, and people, especially youngsters, don't have to sit still. Singing, both of the choir and congregation, usually takes up more time than preaching, and members are free to stand to sway and clap during most choral selections, sometimes to applaud those that are particularly joyous. Young men take turns playing the drums. Sometimes, young women dance during the choir's procession. People march forward for the offering, leaving their tithes or offerings in the respective bucket, and every Sunday morning there is a boisterous period when visitors are welcomed by the hugs and handshakes of what seems to be half the members present. (They call it a "One Accord Greeting," and it is a far cry from the liturgically similar "passing of the peace" in many white churches.) Elders and youth who are so inclined can exercise their musical and public speaking talents in designated roles during the service (singing solos, leading responsive readings, giving announcements) while others who prefer less exposed roles serve as ushers and nurses (whose job it is to make sure that the preacher's water glass is filled and that no one in the pews is injured by excess enthusiasm), roles to be reversed during Men's and Women's Months. Worship is robust, not fragile, and although it is said that things should be done "decently and in order," there is no sense that the spiritedness of the event would be spoiled by a child's mere cry.

The intergenerational ethic. Church leaders and the youth

department stress that children belong in worship, an expectation that is alternately a burden on families (when the kids just don't want to be there) and an opportunity for them (a safe place to bring them). To make that possible, the balcony at the back of the church is informally set aside for families as a place with a more relaxed standard of decorum, where grownups are freer to come and go, to take little kids to the bathroom, wipe their noses and tie their shoes, where older children can quietly read a book, and still older youth can sneak looks at one another. Those in the balcony join with everyone else in the march to the offering plate, and the children are expected to have something to put in it. From time to time, youth workers lead an hour of "children's church" at the rear of the balcony, where primary grade children are given other things to do during the sermon. There is also a nursery for the youngest kids, which some parents take advantage of on and off during the long service. But no other activity of religious significance goes on during worship.

Just as children are supposed to be in worship, so adults are expected to be in Sunday School during the preceding hour, even if, from week to week, only about a third of them are. Age-graded classes study the same syllabus of Biblical texts according to what the pastor calls a scheme of "graduation, not generation." All the classes come together before worship for a collective review session, where a delegation from one of the classes, who may be middle-aged or pre-teen, summarizes the lesson as they understand it.

Every fourth Sunday is Youth Day, where the young people take on just about every role in worship other than the pastor's--ushers, readers, soloists, devotional leaders--both in the morning service and in the evening. With the proud help of their coaches, they often perform contemporary dance. Because fewer people regularly return in the evening, the pastor and other elders make a special appeal to the congregation at the morning service, "please come out to support our youth." Like any One Accord worship service, youth night is for people of all ages.

The intergenerational ethic goes both ways. Kids are expected to make at least an effort to participate in worship, and grownups are expected to appreciate the kids' dancing. The pastor insists that elders must be willing to experiment with new worship styles even as he equally insists that youth mind their manners. Whether an inspirational speech is given by a

teenager or a dowager, the speaker is given respectful attention. Deference is owed to the wisdom that is supposed to come with age, even when, as is often the case in immigrant churches, some of the teenagers have a better command of English than some of their Sunday School teachers.

The intergenerational ethic is dramatically different from the generationally specific offerings of the many white middle class churches where youth have their own celebration service. When we asked the pastor's wife if One Accord's youth have activities of their own, she very emphatically said that they do not. "They need supervision and guidance," she said.

The village. Accompanying our families from their homes to One Accord, we were struck by how comfortable the young people seemed to be once they arrived, the boys of one family fanning out to the coat room, the sanctuary, and Sunday School classrooms. During worship, the oldest son kept his eye on his youngest brother while the middle son found his way to his grandmother's regular pew. The girls in our other family (cousins to one another) spent an afternoon lull between a mid-day dinner and an evening baptism roaming around the church, the parking lot, and the convenience store across the street (as far as they were allowed to go, they told us). They chatted with other girls, played computer games in one classroom, practiced hip-hop dancing to a boom box in another, and munched on the "junk food" they bought at the store, all the while their mother/aunt studied for a job-related exam in the church library. We knew how strict the mother was about where and with whom her girls could be, but she was confident that the score of adults who also spent that lazy afternoon at the church would keep an eye on them. On other occasions, the older girls were themselves part of the surveillance team, looking after smaller children in the balcony. In many ways, church feels like an extended family.

But the family itself can feel like church. The girls who played and danced in church showed off their Biblical literacy during a home study session, as they took turns reciting the books of the New Testament, first straight through and then in reverse order. The Bible study was opened by one girl with song and closed by the other with prayer. Our other family made a practice of a hand-held prayer of petition before we would leave for church, and their twelve year old boy was called upon to offer grace before dinner one Sunday afternoon. Perhaps some of these rituals were done for our benefit, but we were impressed

that the children could do them at all. There is minimal structural differentiation between family and religion.

Moreover, "family" is understood at One Accord expansively and fictively, not narrowly and specifically; the idea is definitely not limited to the nuclear family. Married couples are neither privileged as the norm nor overly burdened with sole responsibility for their children. Women's Month and Men's Month mean that responsibility for worship cuts across families, being shared by members of the same gender of all ages. Many of the parents are single mothers, many of the children come on their own or with friends and cousins, and grandparents pitch in. Unlike many white Protestant churches, where mothers bear the burden of shushing their toddlers or whisking them out of church before their fussiness upsets others, children at One Accord are both given greater latitude and admonished by other grownups as they see fit. On one of our visits, right after the offering, the pastor announced that he had "a little policing" to do, and he scolded the youth in the balcony for talking and eating during the service. He said that it sometimes helps if you tell people what's expected of them so that they can correct themselves. For today, he concluded, "I'm the Daddy here."

We must reiterate that the extended family community we observed at One Accord is constructed, not given, intentional and not merely traditional. The church bus traverses over a hundred square miles to pick up parishioners every Sunday morning, and many members' kinsfolk live far away, particularly in the south. Nor does everything that goes on please everyone; a frequent complaint is about gossip and back-biting. Just like in a village.