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**To Be Young, Criminalized, and Black:
How the Black Church Matters for Young, Black Men
in the 21st Century**

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May 14, 2012 marked the 20th anniversary of a tragic event that many experts cite as the catalyst that transformed how community leaders, clergy leaders and law enforcement approached crime in the city of Boston. The resulting community-police partnership that emerged provided a model of an integrated community based approach to crime that has aided law enforcement officials in developing ways to tackle crime in cities across the country and around the world. On May 14, 1992, during the funeral of twenty-year old Robert Odom, a group of young men entered Morningstar Baptist Church in Boston and violently attacked a young man

in the congregation (Winship and Berrien 1999; Berrien and Winship 2002). Following the incident black churches in Boston were faced with the harrowing reality that the violence among black youth had reached tragic proportions. In response to this and other violent incidents local clergy formed the Boston Ten Point Coalition, an organization geared towards mitigating what they believed to be the spiritual and social causes of inner-city crime.

As part of their efforts to quell black-on-black violence, the Ten Point Coalition organized Boston Freedom Summer in 1994, which brought together black inner-city youth and college students of color. Organizers hoped that by providing inner-city youth with positive role models they could present teens with a positive alternative to violence and crime. Modeled after the Freedom Summer of 1964, organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the purpose of the initiative was to empower communities with the skills and knowledge necessary to create lasting change in their community. During the course of the summer, however, it became clear that organizers had overestimated the degree to which Boston youth would adopt the model of success presented by college students and the ability of college students to relate to the perils faced by inner-city youth (Parker 1994). Parker (1994) notes:

We could not simply tell them to change their [local youth] attitudes toward institutions that have written them off. Instead, our job was to bring out their best, without rigidly prescribing what that "best" would look like -- without saying: "I am the definition of success. Be like me." And that required us to struggle against our own sense that we could solve all the problems, and to strive instead for the kind of humility that says: "We are here to learn from you and to do our part." We had some success in this area, but also saw considerable misunderstanding in discussions between college students and neighborhood youth.

The dilemma faced by Freedom Summer organizers points to the broader challenge of meeting the needs of youth who have a myriad of models of "success", not all of which are positive or even realistic to attain.

One might draw a number of conclusions based on the outcome of programs like Freedom Summer of 1994. It could be argued that the program was simply one more example of the limitedness of the Black Church as a socio-political organization. Freedom Summer in Boston nearly 20 years ago underscores a reality that is just as meaningful today: Attempts to bridge the gap between a punitive approach to crime and rehabilitative preventative methods is an endeavor fraught with complex cultural, organizational and institutional issues.

In this essay I examine how the Black Church as a central institution within the black community possesses the resources, both spiritual and sociological, to help young black men negotiate the tenuous position they hold in U.S. Society. In outlining a framework I examine three areas ripe for future theoretical and empirical attention: 1) an examination of how masculinities have historically been defined within U.S. black churches and the extent to which this influenced contemporary conversations around masculinity and race 2) The role of the Black Church in organizing social protest movements and key ideological elements that affirmed and encouraged black men 3) The relationship between of the leadership model demonstrated by black male leadership within the Black Church and the social needs of young black males in contemporary U.S. society.

The Urgency of Now

In discussing “black male youth” I am referring to a specific segment of this demographic. While some studies that focus on this population of young adults have often addressed this population as a homogenous group, I use the term more narrowly (Billson & Majors 1992; Anderson 1999). Within the context of this paper I speak specifically of young

men, like those involved in the Morning Star Baptist shooting, involved in high-risk violent behavior but also those whose mere residence in high crime communities stigmatizes them. The literature addressing this population often focuses on the cultural motivations for oppositional behaviors, such as the desire to challenge white male norms or promote a form of masculinity that both adopts and glorifies the “trophy” of inner-city social life (Billson & Majors 1992; Anderson 1999). Hence, the portrayal of this segment of the black community is often one that fails to capture their behaviors as responding to unjust social structures that infringe upon their families, communities and their very personhood. As Ferguson notes, young men in high crime communities often struggle in negotiating sometimes competing identities, some positive and others negative (Ferguson, 2001). Focusing on this population provides scholars with a useful set of theoretical tools to engage with a demographic that is often neglected or caricatured in media and scholarship alike (Solomon 1988).

Rising inequality in America is nothing new, yet of late it has become the latest hot topic for pundits and media personalities to discuss. For low income black Americans the stark contrast between their poor communities and the white picket fence image of the American Dream has been an unfortunate reality long before the term “the 99%” became en vogue.¹ Wilson’s (1987) canonical text on America’s “underclass”, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, highlights how urban deindustrialization and the rising crack market resulted in communities ravaged by crippling poverty. With the rise in poverty came the rise in the underground economy. Coupled with the passage of stricter drug laws young men, mostly from communities of color, were going

¹ The term ‘99%’ is a reference to the social class terminology developed during the Occupy Wall Street movement that began in 2011. The term refers to the majority of U.S. residents who lie outside of the top 1% of wealthy citizens.

to prison in record numbers for longer periods of time. Western and Pettit (2002) find that by the age of thirty approximately 30 percent of non-Hispanic black men have been imprisoned. For black men without a high school degree the chance of being incarcerated rises to approximately 60 percent. Compared to their white counterparts the risk of incarceration is 6 to 8 times higher for black males. When compared to other educational and vocational life events researchers find that prison records among black men in their thirties were twice as common as those who had military service or earned a bachelor's degree (Western and Pettit 2002). Sadly, for black men incarceration is a "...normal stopping point on the route to mid-life" (Western and Pettit, 2002: 164).

For scholars like Michelle Alexander (2010) the exponential rise in incarceration rates among young minority men has ushered in another chapter of racial inequality. The era of New Jim Crow, as Alexander (2010) calls contemporary inequality, is one in which the signs displayed on public facilities and laws that characterized the country's segregationist era have been replaced by public policies and legislation that, although stripped of explicitly racial language, disproportionately affect minorities and the poor. In critiquing the current state of U.S. inequality Alexander suggests that to address the devastating effects of mass incarceration and economic inequality civil rights organizations of today like those of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s must prioritize the needs of the most disadvantaged over individual or even organizational career goals. Otherwise, she warns, their strategies and leadership will be rendered useless. To Alexander new leaders are likely to be found among those who have witnessed first

hand the harrowing effects of New Jim Crow. According to Alexander (2010: 247), men and women who

...know best the brutality of the new caste system—a group with greater vision, courage and determination than the old guard can muster...this new generation must not disrespect their elders or disparage their contributions or achievements...but once respects have been paid, they should march right past them emboldened, as King once said, by the fierce urgency of now.

I would argue that the young black men who face odds that seem nigh impossible to overcome are perhaps the most capable to lead this “new generation” who will challenge the ills and inequalities experienced by their generation. To do so, however, they will need help and that help will most likely come from the leaders and institutions within their own communities.

The Black Church, though certainly not the only institution within minority communities, is one that can offer a support system for young men negotiating their manhood in high crime communities. Historically the Black Church not only addressed the needs of congregants but those outside of the four walls of the church. Meeting the needs of the downtrodden within their community was not was not merely an ideal but an elemental principle of Christian service. Briefly, let us examine concrete ways in which the Black Church has fulfilled both the spiritual and social needs of men and women in their churches and communities.

Black Manhood and the Black Church

In *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois (1903) describes the role of clergy in the African American community: “The Preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a "boss," an intriguer, an idealist—all this he is, and ever, too, the center of a group of men, now twenty, now a thousand in number.” Du Bois’ observation highlights the multifaceted role that black clergy held within their communities during a time when the oppressive

weight of Jim Crow racism, economic and political disenfranchisement challenged the very personhood of black men and women. Black clergy were not merely the spiritual leaders of their respective congregations but also the representatives for their communities in ways that granted them considerable respect.

In his analysis of the intersection of manhood and the Black Church Becker (1972) explores the extent to which black clergy and by extension the Black Church continues to hold salience in the black community. Four aspects of manhood that Becker (1972) identifies as being embodied in the work and mission of the Black Church are: *leadership, independence, black identity, and vocation*. The role of the historically Black Church to imbue black congregants with ideals that challenge the dehumanizing system of slavery and Jim Crow are values, that can assist young black male youth today as they face the strongholds of mass incarceration and invidious racism (Omi and Winant, 1986).

Masculinities, within the context of the Black Church, are in part shaped by the broader social context. During slavery, for example, the role of black male church leadership served as a kind of intermediary between black society and white society. This role, then, was not only limited to the sacred duties but often to aiding in the secular aspects of men and women within his community. With the founding of black independent churches black clergy were better able to define manhood on their own terms. These institutions were distinct from white congregations, in which blacks were often relegated to menial roles. The founding of the African Methodist Church, as Daniel Payne, the denomination's first historian, notes "gave the black man 'an independence of character which he could neither hope for nor attain unto, if he had remained as the ecclesiastical vassal of his white brethren (Payne 1891, *in* Becker 1972: 320). Furthermore, the A.M.E. church allowed for black men to exercise "independent thought," "independent action," and an "independent hierarchy," and allowed men to "feel and recognize our individuality and our heaven created manhood." (Payne 1891, *in* Becker 1972:320)

In light of newfound independence and the freedom to think independently of white churches black Christians created their own agenda, one of which included missionary work to Africa. While the actual motivation for missionary work in Africa can be criticized as an extension of the Western

imperialistic endeavor the actualization of a broader black identity speaks to the relationship between as sense of independence and black identity. The A.M.E church leaders' desire to evangelize to Africans not simply out of moral obligation but also because of a sense of shared racial bond, illustrates how moving beyond the four walls of the church to promote racial uplift has long been an objective of the Black Church. In the case of the A.M.E church racial uplift meant sharing the gospel to their African brothers. Today uplift within the black community not only means sharing the gospel but also meeting the downtrodden at the point of their need. Therefore, being a member of the Black Church was not only defined by one's faith in Christ, but also integrating faith with action. It was expected that members recognized their role as their brother's and sister's keeper. How have the elements of leadership, independence, black identity and vocation shaped fights for justice after slavery? How can leaders of the contemporary Black Church articulate manhood to young black males today? It is to these questions that I now turn my attention.

The Black Church Today

A review of the literature on the contemporary Black Church reveals that the very term "The Black Church" is one fraught with definitional ambiguity. Depending upon the scholar, this term may refer to predominantly African American congregations belonging to mainline denominations or include other predominantly African American congregations. The Black Church, used here, refers to mainline denominations, as well as those churches belonging to the Holiness-Pentecostal-Apostolic tradition. Because this latter group of churches informs both a historical and contemporary analysis of counter-cultural socio-religious protest, their inclusion is crucial to this model (Wilmore 1998). Using this definition of the Black Church, one can identify several areas of focus in contemporary studies of the church. For the purposes of this analysis I address two areas of research. First, scholars continue to examine the relationship

between religious beliefs and social practices. Second, there is the body of work that examines the role of the Black Church in the political and social mobilization of both congregants and non-believers in their communities. These studies tend to explore the (in)effectiveness of the church as an institution of social change and justice (Baer 1988; Karenga 1989; Calhoun-Brown 1999). Findings from these studies illustrate that although many African American churches address some societal ills, the problem of youth crime have often been neglected (Mitchell 2001). McRoberts' (2003) ethnographic study of Black churches in one of Boston's most dangerous neighborhoods demonstrates this gap in the social work of community-minded congregations.

While all the churches in McRoberts' (2003) study defined themselves as activist, it was clear that there was a disconnect between their words and actions. For example, some of the churches attended to the specific social and economic needs of congregants without addressing the needs of the individuals in the surrounding area. McRoberts (2003:144) describes this feature of religiously based social work:

In Four Corners, I observed a critical disjuncture between human community and place: the geographic neighborhood was the site of multiple institutions of civil society in the form of religious congregations but was not a central object of institutional concern. For this reason, the capacities and connections that churches generated had little relevance for the neighborhood.

Although McRoberts' analysis is based in Boston, his finding reflects a situation that applies to other Black churches. By drawing upon oppositional forms of black spirituality, church leaders can begin to address the "critical disjuncture" discussed by McRoberts.

Money, Faith and Prosperity

In recent years there has been a growing popularity of churches that emphasize the relationship between faith and financial prosperity. These “prosperity gospel” churches, as they have come to be known, emphasize the relationship between personal success and one’s faithfulness and obedience to God (Harrison 2005). According to Harrison’s (2005) analysis of the prosperity gospel, also known as the Word of Faith movement is rooted in three principles. First, Christians must develop a firm understanding of who they are as followers of Christ and faithfully adhere to the tenants of scripture. Second, believers must confess scriptural promises, thereby affirming that God’s promises will hold true in their daily lives. This principle is most commonly known as “naming and claiming” a particular need or desire. Lastly, believers should seek the manifestation of God’s promises that result from naming and claiming spiritual blessings. These blessings often take the form of financial gain and physical well being.

Some scholars on religion offer a more nuanced view of the prosperity doctrine, one that illustrates how laypeople apply the principles more broadly. Walton (2009) discusses that while men and women may ascribe to the gospel of prosperity, they can also acknowledge the possibility of hardship, financial and material lack, even in the midst of faithfulness to God. In this interpretation prosperity not only means material success but also spiritual growth and emotional endurance in the midst of trying circumstances. Still the rapid growth and popularity of the prosperity gospel by preachers such as Kenneth Hagin Sr., Creflo Dollar and Frederick Price emphasizes tangible success.

Because this recent cultural turn in the Black Church has gained significant attention by the media, it is important to understand the implications of such messages on young African American males at the periphery of society. In one sense the message of prosperity may actually justify the glorification of consumerism associated with inner-city youth. After all, implicit in the message of individual success is the notion that one can overcome current poverty without addressing the macro-structural sources most responsible for perpetuating the very conditions they seek to escape (Frederick 2003; Harrison 2005). The irony of prosperity gospels is that the young men who engage in criminal activity in order to accumulate wealth also want their socio-economic status to align with their beliefs. What Elijah Anderson (1999) call “trophy”, the material wealth young men accumulate, within low income high crime communities are means through which young black males are able to gain hold of the elusive American Dream. A young man residing in a high crime and low income community who is taught that his level of faithfulness to God is correlated with financial and material success can cause confusion, at best. As a result this message of contemporary prosperity gospel may alienate a population that deserves the attention.

In developing a solution to bridge the gap between doctrinal belief and the lived experience of young men I suggest that prosperity doctrine be coupled with practical means through which those most excluded from the ‘American Dream’ can actualize goals through positive methods. An examination of how the Black Church’s tradition of counter-cultural protest offers insight into how churches might reach youth today.

A Tradition of Protest

Protest has long been a part of the Black Church. As noted, dating back to antebellum U.S. society, black spirituality was often a means through which slaves challenged social injustice. This is not to say that accommodationism was not a part of black religious institutions. In fact, many argue that even today the Black Church functions more an opiate, rather than a catalyst for social change (Marx 1967; Frazier 1974; Reed 1986; Baer 1988). Nevertheless, the tradition of counter-cultural protest that did exist in many churches played an instrumental role in imbuing members of the black community with racial pride and socio-political agency.

While protest is an ever-present thread that weaves together the practices of many black churches, there are several historical moments in the United States in which protest against social injustice was most pronounced. The Civil Rights and Black Consciousness era during the 1960s and 1970s, for example, marked an important period in reformatory and revolutionary practices by the Black Church. I would argue that an understanding of the Black Church's role during this era challenges scholarly accounts of the apolitical nature of the Black Church, while clearly demonstrating the similarities between the oppositional black religiosity of yesterday and the oppositional cultural norms of the black male youth of today.

Faith and Works

While many scholars agree that during this moment in American history the Black Church was influential in mobilizing the black community, there is considerable debate regarding the degree to which the Black Church limited social reform or even accommodated the

white middle class. Still, the influence of many African American congregations helped to bring the unjust social conditions of blacks to the fore of America's social conscience both directly and indirectly (McAdam 1982; Morris 1984; Chong 1991). For example, the ideological climate that helped secular organizations and movements like the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and even the Black Consciousness movement, to thrive was in part due to the foundational work of black churches across the country. So, while many scholars may point to the passivity of black churches as a hindrance to gains in civil rights, it was actually the work of many of these churches that encouraged non-violent methods and more radical movements alike.

Central to understanding the socio-political importance of the black consciousness movement is the idea that it tapped into the needs, both socio-economic and psycho-social, of the black "underclass". This movement, largely embodied by the Black Power Movement, gave voice to thousands of young black Americans who felt that the agenda of the Civil Rights Movement, as articulated by the Black Church, failed to directly confront the disease of racism (Franklin and Higginbotham 2010). Several scholars have argued that the radical stance taken by proponents of Black Power ideology was strongly influenced by their distance from the Black Church (Karenga 1989). Yet, despite the outward aversion towards black religion, especially the non-violent message of the Black Church, there is evidence that elements of black religion, albeit radically re-conceptualized, permeated the Black Power movement (Harding 2003). According to Vincent Harding (2003), Black Power advocates' re-articulation of the concept "love" demonstrated an incorporation of black religion's historical use of the term, thereby challenging the seeming division between Black Power and religion. He states:

Even in the presence of such compelling testimony against the adequacy of the older, more comforting religious symbols...it would be myopic to miss the central issues of human life and destiny which course through the current expression of blackness. Issues of anthropology, incarnation, the nature of the universe and of God, issues of hope and faith, questions of eschatology and of the nature of the kingdom, problems concerning love and its functions—all these and more are at stake in the present situation. That they are usually disguised, often submerged, and sometimes denied does not lessen the power of the issues may be heightened by such camouflaging pressures (Harding 2003:716).

This observation is significant because it highlights the fact that there can still be a strong, albeit latent, influence of black religion in outwardly secular movements. For young black men in contemporary America, this is of particular significance because it illustrates that radicalism and religious faith are not diametrically opposed. In constructing a framework that resonates with this group it important to convey this message because religion is all too often portrayed as operating in collusion with the “powers” that be. The relationship that Harding (2003) draws between Black Power and religion is meaningful because it challenges this oft made assumption. Still, the “religion” of love pervasive throughout Black Power discourse does not necessarily imply the existence of a supreme power working on behalf of the oppressed. Because of this aspect, I would argue that the tradition of protest in the Black Power movement provides a strong example of counter-cultural practice and oppositional discourse, but a weak source of spiritual guidance. For marginalized individuals the presence of a higher power in a religion may not be necessary but it does hold several important purposes. Firstly, a Supreme Being can provide individuals with a sense of stability in an otherwise chaotic or unjust world. Secondly, a Supreme Being provides groups at the periphery with the knowledge that there is someone or something more powerful than the source(s) of their oppression. Lastly, and most importantly, belief in a Supreme Being provides individuals with a sense that ultimately justice will be served on their behalf. In

order to incorporate the powerful protest tradition of the Black Power Movement and the deity (Jesus Christ) centered religious thought of the Black Church of the Civil Rights, it is essential that we look towards Black Theology. In using Black Theology to construct a faith based framework for disadvantaged youth it is necessary that several of its elements be modified so that its message resonates with this generation of young black men.

Manhood and the Black Church Today

The first recorded use of the term “black theology” was by theologian James Cone. In using this term, Cone tapped into a growing concern among black clergy who felt that “...the credibility of the Christian faith was being severely tested in the ghettos of the nation” (Cone 1984:20). In the wake of the Black Power Movement black ministers were forced to address the role of the theological concepts they preached in light of the issues faced by marginalized black Americans. It was this process of reevaluation that Black Theology was born. To understand the radical message of Black Theology and why it so clearly applies to the condition of the youth of today, we must begin by discussing its message of racial and self-empowerment.

In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, James Cone (1970) argues that the development of a theological paradigm, such as Black Theology, was due largely to the inability of Christianity, as presented by white theologians, to relate to the needs of African Americans. Because a white, and more precisely white racist ideology, was responsible for black oppression, it was necessary that blacks interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ in light of their race and social position. Proponents of Black Theology argue that throughout the history of the United States the presentation of Christ

by the “White Church” not only failed to speak to the conditions of black America, but was often used to justify their lower social status (Calhoun-Brown 1999). Black Theologians go on to argue that, based on two defining features, Black Theology is ostensibly the “...only expression of Christian theology in America” (Cone 1970:23).

The boldness of this claim rests on that fact that: 1) Black Theology is born out of the needs of an oppressed group. Because any theology which claims the gospel as its source must arise out of the situation of an oppressed people, Black Theology meets this criterion in a way that other variants of Christianity do not 2) the centrality of Jesus Christ in Black Theology affirms the “somebodiness” of blacks in America. It is from these two points that Black Theologians, like Cone, derive a conceptualization of God as prejudiced in favoring blacks. Cone (1970:26) articulates this point in stating:

God, because he is a God of the oppressed, takes sides with black people. He is not color blind in the black-white struggle, but has made an unqualified identification with black people. This means that the movement for black liberation is the work of God himself, affecting his will among men.

What makes this view of God so radical is that it depicts Him, not as the deity who indiscriminately loves people irrespective of their race and background, but as one who exercises a degree of bias in choosing whom to bless. For marginalized groups, the image of God as sympathetic to the tribulations of the oppressed is both powerful and necessary. Moreover, for young men the concept of Black Theology is one that embodies the four aspects of manhood identified by Becker (1972): leadership, independence, black identity, and vocation. The oppressed group, in this case marginalized young men, are situated within a broader framework

that validates their worth, personhood and purpose as children of God. Such a framework is limited, however, without directions for moving from theory to practice.

One of the main criticisms of Black Theology is that it outlined an ideological model without providing a plan of action (Cone 1975; Mitchell 2001). As a result, it became more of a theological framework, rather than a guide for those outside of academe to implement. For practical purposes this is problematic because the likelihood that black male youth will sift through academic jargon to obtain information relevant to their particular situation is quite unlikely. To address this gap in theory and practice, I outline a model that draws upon the key principles of Black Theology that applies to the contemporary conditions facing this demographic

In constructing a 21st century youth-focused Black Theology, it is important to be sensitive to the currents of thought that govern, or at least strongly influence, social policy. A God who favors the oppressed, in the general sense, means that God favors all who are subject to some form of oppression. From a sociological and theological perspective “oppression” is not only limited to social and material matters but so psychological, emotional and, of course, spiritual. To address the narrowness of the term I suggest that Black Theology stress the fact that God, because He is all-knowing, is sympathetic to the needs of all who suffer due to injustice and social inequality. This concept that God is a God of the oppressed, irrespective of race does not completely nullify Black Theology’s claims because God is still one who uniquely addresses the individual needs of particular groups. This modification, however, acknowledges that in an age where class, race and gender inequality affect different groups in varying degrees God, and by

extension the Black Church, is concerned with human injustice. This is important because it encourages youth to identify with the struggles of other marginalized groups, allowing them to challenge injustice more effectively through collaborative efforts. In contrast, the “black-biased” view of Black Theology promotes a type of separatism that weakens the potential strength of movements involving historically oppressed groups.

Another concept in black theology that deserves attention, in light of the socio-cultural changes that have occurred in the last quarter of a century, is the relationship between Black Theologians and the white Church. By and large, many of the critiques made against white churches in the United States may not have changed to the satisfaction of this group of black liberal scholars. However, there have been significant changes in some predominantly white churches and multiethnic churches that call for reexamining the ability of these institutions to meet the needs of truly disadvantaged young men. Now, the changes are not limited to a change in racial discourse. In fact, an adoption of multicultural discourse is often a thinly veiled attempt to comply with contemporary America’s obsession with political correctness. What I refer to is a church’s adoption a model of social action that would both benefit young black men and promote the agenda of Black Theology (at least in part) in congregations and communities that otherwise are unaware of Black Theology. Granted, the suspicion Black Theologians held and continue to hold of white mainstream churches is understandable considering the historical relationship between the white church and African Americans. It is important, however, to recognize that the strength that lies in numbers should encourage proponents of Black Theology to consider

working with previously “off limits” groups. Included in this group should be African American churches that have been labeled as accommodationist by Black Theologians.

The inclusion of traditional black churches in this re-conceptualized model of Black Theology is important because these institutions are most able to reach youth due to their presence in poor inner-city neighborhoods. In the 1970s black churches in such areas generally eschewed the message of Black Theology because, for them, it was too theologically radical (Cone 1975). In order for the essential message of Black Theology to resonate with the population for whom it is addressed its message need not be watered down, with respect to its role as the prophetic voice of Black Christianity (West 1982). What must be modified is the condescending tone used by Black Theologians in describing the Black Church. Like most other institutions the Black Church is an imperfect one. However, because it continues to serve many important functions for African Americans, belittling its significance *in toto* only hinders a potential partnership between black theology advocates and traditional black clergy. The approach of black theology’s proponents should be to find a middle ground with inner city churches that does not require them to sacrifice their position on social justice and the importance of attending to relationship between racial identity and religious faith. By incorporating this modified version of black theology in their teachings, the Black Church can better address the conditions of young black men. In this way black theology becomes more than ivory tower discourse on social change. It becomes an operationalizable blueprint of change that benefits troubled male youth. To explore how a model of manhood might be practically applied I

suggest a public policy oriented framework that emphasizes the role of community support, civic engagement and the leadership of role models.

Model of Manhood

The characteristics of leadership, independence, black identity, and vocation that Becker (1972) identifies can be fostered through what Mitchell (2001) calls a “moral education”. A moral education not only emphasizes academic education but also a strong work ethic, responsibility to family, community and vocation. Ultimately the goal of encouraging these values is so that young men learn by example that honesty, loyalty and respect are characteristics associated with strength and manhood. To accomplish this I suggest two broad focus areas: 1) An integrated network of family and community resources 2) School based support system that expose young people to financial development and professional opportunities.

Developing an integrated network between families and communities is complicated by several factors that require careful attention. It is important to highlight the weaknesses that exist within the Black Church and black families, though doing so should not disqualify either institution as a valuable resource for black youth. Identifying flaws, such as the lack of male role models within families and disengagement of many churches from community affairs provides an opportunity for needed change.

In underserved communities the ability to effectively assist young men of color is limited due to financial constraints, as well as a lack of cultural resources necessary to assist young men and women as they transition into adulthood. Black churches, which have been effecting in

limiting criminal participation among black youth through church programming has the potential to be a valuable resource (Johnson et. al. 2000). Moreover, Pinn (2002) highlights the importance of local black churches working collectively to create opportunities for job development, housing and educational opportunities for community members.

Still, there are steps churches can take to be an even stronger resource for disadvantage youth. For example, community churches should welcome the contribution of local activists, school counselors, clinicians and other experts who can provide training on dealing with the myriad of issues young people face. Churches that do not have the resources to receive appropriate training might consider partnering with well established secular mentoring programs that have a proven track record of effectively matching young people to properly screened mentors. Furthermore, in reaching out to youth, it is critically important that churches not undermine their presence within communities by turning a blind eye to corruption within congregations and among leaders. This point is of particular importance in light of recent high profile scandals involving church leaders and young black males, such as the one involving Atlanta preacher Eddie Long of New Birth Baptist Church (Robinson, 2010). An unwillingness to render appropriate sanctions for inappropriate behavior effectively delegitimizes the Black Church as a resource for young black males.

Missing Black Fathers

Social policy analysts have long grappled how to address the high rates of female headed households and absent black male role models in black communities. On one hand research

shows that black families socialize their children in ways similar to white families. On the other, many of those families lack the social and economic capital to help their children actualize their educational and social goals later in life. As a result black youth continue to be face staggering obstacles (Berger and Simon 1975; Snyder, McClaughlin, Findeis 2009). Transforming the culture around marriage and out of wedlock childbirth within the black community can be politically unwieldy. How does one highlight the social implications of a lack of two parent households without dehumanizing the individuals for whom those conditions apply? How does one demonstrate the benefits of marriage without appearing to force moral imperatives on a particular demographic? Changing the culture around marriage is no easy task and one that if successful, will take some time to unfold. In the short term community leaders can present options to parents on ways to engage young people in educational, entrepreneurial and employment goals. Having long term goals and expectations from parents and community members that are clearly articulated is one step toward showing young people that they are not limited by their surroundings.

The second way young black men can receive assistance is through the educational system. Access to mentoring, for example, may be difficult for a single mother working a full time job to identify if she is balancing her responsibility as caretaker and breadwinner. Schools can help to make resources available and, with consent from guardians, match students to mentors within their communities. One possible solution is a school based model similar to that of the Harlem Children's Zone that incorporates a mentoring component. Research shows that high quality schools, like the Harlem Children's Zone, can provide young people with sufficient

resources to effectively close the white-black achievement gap for middle school age children (Dobbie and Fryer 2011). In addition to the academic focus, mentor focused programs can link children with long term mentors from their communities. Such mentorships would ideally begin early in the child's life if no male family member or mentor has been established by the time the child enters kindergarten. Finally, financial resources, such as summer employment, exposure to community service and professions are a way to provide youth with alternatives to negative activities.

Framing Public Policy

From a public policy standpoint it is important that these programs be specially tailored to meet the needs of high-risk youth of all backgrounds. Because black males make up a disproportionate number of high risk youth in some communities they will still benefit from these programs. In framing the goals and objectives of youth focused programs it is important to emphasize factors such as economic and crime challenges within communities to appeal to funding agencies, both private and government. Race-based language may narrow the opportunities to draw support for programs that would assist youth.

Community oriented programs and those that promote moral education that creatively incorporate Black Theology's fundamental tenets, result in what I believe to be the desired outcome for young men of color: Male youth who are equipped with the ideological, educational and psycho-social skills necessary to be effective leaders, businessmen, educators and, most importantly, responsible men.

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