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The Black Church : responding to the drug-related mass incarceration of young Black males : "If you had been here my Brother would not have died!"

Sharon E. Moore
University of Louisville, semoore02@louisville.edu

A. Christson Adedoyin
Samford University

Michael A. Robinson
University of Georgia

Daniel A. Boamah
University of Louisville

The Black Church: Responding to the Drug-Related Mass Incarceration of Young Black Males: "If you had been here my Brother would not have died!"

Sharon E. Moore, A. Christson Adedoyin, Michael A. Robinson, & Daniel A. Boamah

The mass incarceration of young Black males for drug-related offences is a social issue that has broad implications. Some scholars have described this as a new form of racism that needs to be addressed through the concerted effort of various institutions, including the Black Church. In this paper the authors will elucidate the past and current roles of the Black Church, discuss the utilization of the social work Theory of Empowerment and Black Church theology to address the disproportionality of drug-related mass incarceration of young Black males, focus on initiatives undertaken by the Black Church to address this issue and further, discuss the role of the Black Church in ex-drug offender reentry and reintegration. This paper will conclude with implications for the Black Church and incarcerated young Black males.

> "Lord, the one you love is sick. " When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death.... Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up....." Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died...." Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!..." Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out! " The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go. " (John 11:3-4, 21, 35-36, 43-44, New King James Version).

I N THE BIBLICAL PASSAGE ABOVE THE SUPERNATURAL HEALING POWER OF Christ is displayed when he raises a dead man, Lazarus, from the grave. Today, many Black men are representative of Lazarus in that they are dealing with mental, emotional, social, physical and/or spiritual sickness and are grappling with "dead situations" that thwart their human potential and threaten their very existence. Additionally, similarly to Lazarus, there is hope for Black men, and there are vehicles for restoration, one of which is the Black Church.

The Black Church has been defined by Lincoln & Mamiya (1990) as the Black controlled independent denominations, which make up the heart of Black Christians and is principally concerned with the expressions of spirituality and the religious practices of African-Americans. It also serves as a functional family for its congregants and community and serves a plethora of vital social and economic functions (Caldwell, Greene, & Billingsley, 1994). It continues to be the primary location of Black political activity and the vehicle through which Blacks can address the dominant social order and relate to their God through their cultural heritage. The therapeutic benefit of Black Church services has been documented whereby worship, prayer and other forums provide emotional release from the stress of daily living and therapeutic group experiences whereby members' experiences with being Black, in a society that is not always welcoming to minorities, can be validated (Guillory, 2010; McRae, Thompson & Cooper, 1999). It is host to numerous empowerment initiatives and activities and seeks to address social inequality in many areas. One of these areas of inequality is the disproportionate number of young Black males who are incarcerated for drug-related offenses.

Some scholars have described the mass incarceration of young Black males as a new form of racism that needs to be addressed through the concerted effort of numerous institutions among which is the Black Church. The importance of the Black Church to its community cannot be overstated in that it has been and continues to serve as a formidable vehicle for social change. Using the social work theory of empowerment and Black Church theology, the authors of this paper will highlight past and current roles of the Black Church to address the disproportionality of drug-related mass incarceration of young Black males and will discuss the role of the Black Church in ex-drug offender reentry and reintegration. The paper will conclude with implications for the Black Church and incarcerated young Black males.

Black Males and Drug Related Incarceration

The combined percentages of the people who identified themselves as Black during the past U.S. Census is about 14 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). It is important to note that, in most cases, an individual's response to the race question is based upon self-identification. We use the terms Black(s) and African American(s) interchangeably. Our use of Black is congruent

with all individuals who fall under the broad category of Black through self, cultural or systemic identification. For the purpose of this paper, young Black males are defined as self-identified Black individuals who are male in gender and are between the ages of 18 to 29 years. The limitation on the age is only for classification purposes and is not in any way suggestive that the incarceration of Black males below or above the age limit is of less concern. Age 18 is the official emancipation age from juvenile status in most states and under the 26th Amendment to the Constitution, regardless of the state laws, 18 is the age at which one is eligible to vote (Brown, & Pluta Brown, 2004; Hamilton, 2012). Typically, within this age group, the majority of young males finish high school and either further their education or begin to pursue a trade or career. It is also at this time that many young males develop intimate relationships to establish families, build networks of friends and career associates, and begin to establish the path towards upward economic mobility and community involvement. It is therefore important to examine and address any social issue, such as incarceration, that could interrupt these processes, especially when the social phenomenon is disproportional.

The onset of drug-related mass incarceration has been traced to the declaration of the war on drugs that the Nixon administration launched in 1971 as part of the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970 (Dufton, 2012; Irwin, 1973; Zakaria, 2012). President Nixon was famously quoted as declaring the consequences of drug abuse as public enemy number one. According to Mauer (2004) (as cited by Alexander, 2010) "the impact of the drug war has been astounding. In less than thirty years the U.S. penal population exploded from around 300,000 to more than 2 million, with drug convictions accounting for the majority of the increase" (p. 6). As a result Mold (2012) indicated that within the last 43 years over 45 million Americans at one time or another have been arrested for drug related offenses.

In the United States, men are incarcerated at a rate of 14 times higher than women and young Black males are at a disadvantage relative to other groups who are in jail or prison (Warren, Chirocos, & Bales, 2012). Warren, Chirocos, and Bales (2012) noted that in many cases the incarceration of young Black males was due to non-violent drug possession and drug sales/trafficking crimes. According to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the percentage of Black drug users in proportion to total drug users in the United States is about 12% but Blacks represent 38% of drug related arrests and 59% of drug offenders in state prisons (http://www.naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet). An estimated 500% increase in the rate of drug-related imprisonment for Black males was noted between 1994 and 2004 (Mauer, 2004; Mukku et al., 2012). As of 2009, Black males were incarcerated 6.7 times more often than white males (Mukku, Benson, Alam, Richie & Bailey, 2012). The precipitous rise in drug-related imprisonment was observed to disproportionally affect young Black males compared to their white counterparts from the early 1980s onward (Alexander, 2010).

The reasons for the problem of disproportionate Black male incarceration are many, highly systemic, and cyclical in nature. Sentencing disparity has been identified as one of the major reasons why Black males are disproportionally over-represented in drug-related incarceration compared to whites in the U.S. (Alexander, 2010; Blumstein, Cohen, Martin, & Tonry, 1983; Mitchell & Caudy, 2013; Wilkins, Newton, & Steer, 1991). Other reasons include drug laws and policies such as "federal crack cocaine laws," the "Three Strikes"/habitual offender policies, and injustices in the judicial system. In spite of a general recognition of racial disproportionality against Blacks in the United States' prison system, consensus regarding the reasons for this existence is scant. The majority of Blacks believe that racist practices by the police and courts are the most salient reason, but the majority of Whites give less credence to racial injustices as a major reason why Black men are disproportionately imprisoned (Unnever, 2008).

While the debate for reasons continues, it is evident that it is the young Black male whose plight will continue to be at stake and need urgent intervention. The effects and the characteristics of young Black males who are at risk of incarceration are evident. The literature suggests that Black inmates are more likely to have grown up in household headed by a single mother, have children and siblings, have never been married or completed high school, have low incomes with at least some of their annual income coming from illegal sources, and have not been employed full-time (Jackson, 1997). The disparity and disproportionality in the justice system that they experience results in their being denied educational opportunities and, by extension, social mobility, having post-prison challenges of reintegration into society, unemployment, disenfranchisement of voting rights, health disparities, being absent fathers, and in some instances being re-sentenced for crimes. Hence, their incarceration becomes cyclical and often generational. It is our contention that the mass incarceration of young Black males is a social justice issue that merits a social reform response and in this context we look to one of the most formidable historic institutions of change, the Black Church, to champion this cause.

The Black Church: Historical Overview

Africans brought to this country as slaves came with a culture rich in spiritual and religious traditions and practices. During that era, in some areas of the Southern states, Blacks and Whites sometimes attended church services together, but because of racist practices Blacks were often not allowed to fully participate in church services and activities that were dominated by Whites (Sawyer, 2001; Moore, 1991). Subsequently, in their quest for both autonomy from White authority and religious freedom, African-Americans began their own denominations and their own houses of worship.

The Black Church served a myriad of functions within the African-American community (Moore, 1994, Hill, 1997). It served as a coping and survival mechanism during slavery. Initially emerging as an "invisible institution," an informal network among the slaves began which was instrumental for abolitionist activity and the Underground Railroad (Frazier, 1963, Moore, 1991). The first known formal Black church was established between 1750 and 1773 and soon after others followed (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Moore, 1991). These churches provided social service functions and were responsible for the eventual formation of African-American seminaries, Black colleges and academies, insurance companies, banks, the NAACP, and the civil rights movement of the sixties (Lincoln & Mamiya 1990). By 1906 over 36,000 Black churches were in existence with a total membership of over 3.5 million (Birchett, 1992). Black churches have assumed the character of a 'family house,' a symbol of unity and identity. According to Roberts (1987), "the nature and mission of the church as an extended family made up of believers in Christ is the context for a viable Black ecclesiology" (p. 40). The church as an entity conceptualizes its affairs to include the total world of the community. The total world encompasses various aspects of life in Black communities including social, economic, political and cultural elements.

Presently, there are approximately 150,000 African American churches nationwide and roughly 87% of African-Americans indicate that they are affiliated with a religious group (The National Black Church Initiative, 2011; Sahgal & Smith, 2009; Billingsley, 1992). Not only has the number of African American churches substantially grown but the congregational size of many of these houses of worship has also burgeoned. Now known as mega-churches, because they boast memberships of 2,000 congregants or more, they are institutions that continue to be central to the African American community's spiritual, political, social and economic activity and the means by which Blacks can relate to their Divinity through their cultural heritage. Because of the magnitude of the number of people who attend them and their vast economic resources, African American mega-churches are in a strategic position to utilize their means to help alleviate a whole host of problems faced by the African American community. Briefly, there is a broad array of activities offered to the community by mega and non-mega churches such as self-help and a variety of support groups like those designed to benefit those who struggle with substance abuse issues and who have HIV and AIDS, lay health advisory networks, youth development and afterschool academic tutorial assistance, latchkey programs, mental health counseling services, fatherhood initiatives, marriage and family counseling, food and clothing outreach, and a variety of other services that provide a context for empowering the African American community. The African American church, whatever the size, is the only institution outside of the family where people of African descent have full autonomy. For that reason it can serve and should serve as a powerful social change agent.

The Black Church was also one of the first contexts in which social work practice took place (Garland, 1992). In fact, Johnson calls the church the "mother of social work" (1941, p. 404). The church was instrumental in the development of social work and serves as a place where social workers provide human services. Social workers who practice within the church work with individuals, systems, and organizations in sundry ways. The broad range of initiatives being undertaken within the milieu of the African American church provides a context for social workers and others to assist those who have many issues (Johnson & Staples, 2005).

Social Work Theory of Empowerment and
Black Church Theology

The use of social work empowerment theory as a framework for social change is evidence-based, suggesting that effective social movements and interventions require empowerment-related processes and outcomes across multiple levels of the social system (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Empowerment is defined as "positive social psychological transformation, related to a sense of being able to (re)shape the social world, that takes place for members of subordinated groups who overturn (or at least challenge) existing relations of dominance" (Drury & Reicher, 2009, p. 708). Encapsulated in the definition is the idea that empowerment is a participatory process whereby individuals, organizations, and communities address issues of social injustice (Rappaport, 1987; Solomon, 1976). Empowerment has been postulated to be a major theory of community psychology (Rappaport, 1981, 1984, 1987) and social work (Itzhaky & York, 2002; Pinderhughes, 1989), specifically social work in African American communities (Solomon, 1976). It is frequently used as a guide for intervention in high-risk communities (Bentley, 2000; Minkler, Thompson, Bell, & Rose, 2001).

Empowerment theory proposes that power can be acquired through social interaction and as such it is infinite and has numerous sources (Bricker-Jenkins & Hooyman, 1986; Weick, 1982). In general terms, it is a process of making impact over conditions that matter to people who share interests, identities, or experiences (Fawcett, et al, 1995). Speer and Hughey (1995) asserted that it requires the interaction of both the individual and organization/community in a dialectical or reciprocal context for empowerment to generate the social power necessary for social change.

Black Church theology refers to a variety of Black theologies, but there are common principles that are central and that resonate through them. Borne out of a history of oppression and discrimination and a renewed understanding of the gospel, Black Church theology has a goal of constructing an authentic liberated society for people (Kunnie, 1994). At its core is the quest towards the liberation of the marginalized, with a focus

on the injustice done to Blacks. This theory of total liberation is manifested in linguistic and racial and cultural dimensions of Black people (Hopkins, 2000) and is manifested as an agent of change through individual empowerment and community mobilization (Harden, 2011).

Embedded in both the social work theory of empowerment and Black Church theology is the fundamental goal of creating positive social change to address issues of marginalization, injustice, and, to a larger degree, any issue that individuals or the community perceives as problematic. A point of congruence in both theories is that the source of power for change is generated through the people. Through the empowerment of the individual and mobilization of empowered individuals into an organized community around a common cause, power is generated to influence change. Finally, social work empowerment theory and Black Church theology involve participatory processes at individual and community levels. These processes involve multifaceted layers of interactions described as reciprocal in nature and require deliberate planning and actions to ensure effectiveness.

Empowerment Theory as a Strategy to Stem Mass Incarceration

The application of the social work empowerment theory to address the drug-related mass incarceration of young Black males is hinged on mobilizing and enhancing the capabilities of the Black Church towards educating young Black males and the African American community about mass incarceration in the U.S. Empowerment as conceptualized by Drury and Reicher (2009) implies that the Black Church should take a leadership role in challenging the disproportionality in the drug-related sentencing of Blacks. In addition, the empowerment theory as posited by Gutiérrez, DeLois, and GlenMaye, (1995) suggests that Black churches should deploy a strategy with young Black males within their congregations to increase their knowledge about the criminal justice system and the consequences of getting involved in drug-related offenses.

Furthermore, the Black Church can provide enlightenment about the power to young Black males and the Black community that results from positive personal, social, community, and systemic change. In this regard, empowerment encapsulates the Black Church's ability to guide in resource identification and distribution (Dodd & Gutierrez, 1990); development of self-esteem and feelings of personal worth (Gutiérrez, DeLois, & GlenMaye,1995); initiating behavioral change interventions (Zimmerman,1995); and inspiring citizen participation at the community level towards concerted drug-related prison deterrent initiatives.

Using Black Theology to Address Mass Incarceration of Young Black Males

According to Cone (1990), the quintessence of Black theology is:

> A theology of liberation because it is a theology which arises from identification with oppressed Blacks of America, seeking to interpret the gospel of Jesus in the light of the Black condition. It believes that the liberation of the Black community is God's liberation. (pp. 4-5.)

Contingent to this conceptualization of Black theology in relation to addressing the drug-related mass incarceration of young Black males is the responsibility of the Black Church to identify with the oppression of young Black males who are disproportionally incarcerated, analyze, advocate, and take leadership in the liberation of them. In addition to identifying with oppressed young Black males, the Black Church, according to Cone (1990), has a prophetic social justice mandate to help young Black males see the unassailable power of Christ to "break the chains of oppression" (p. 5). In this regard the Black Church needs to present a social gospel in such a manner that it not only speaks to the human condition and social problems that are the reality of many American young Black males but also provides answers to their plight as well.

Moreover, Black churches can utilize Black theology by providing liberating educational and behavioral change interventions that focus on preventing drug-related offenses that are responsible for the mass imprisonment of young Black males. Furthermore, Black churches through the liberation theology paradigm of Black theology should be more proactive in liberation initiatives or activities (Cone, 1990). This may include developing programs and services that assist in the reentry and reintegration of young Black parolees, and those on probation with a goal of decreasing their rates of recidivism.

Past and Present Attempts at Sentencing Reforms

In response to sentencing disparities, specific federal and congressional actions have been taken in the past to address this anomaly. First, President Reagan signed the Sentencing Reform Act (SRA) of 1984 to standardize judicial sentencing in the U.S. (see Wilkins, Newton, & Steer, 1991). Consequently, members of Congress and the federal government responded with a more punitive and comprehensive legislation called the Anti-drug Abuse Act of 1986 (Alexander, 2010; Beaver, 2009). An unintended consequence of this legislation was that it paved the way for one of the most controversial, unfair, and infamous sentencing guidelines in the history of the U.S. war against drugs. Popularly known as the one-hundred-to-one (100:1) sentencing ratio, the ratio

implies that there is a huge disparity between sentencing for offenders who are charged with the possession of powder cocaine compared to crack cocaine.

The implication of this sentencing ratio disparity is that Blacks are more likely to be peddlers, in possession of, and indicted for crack cocaine, while whites are often associated with the distribution, and indictment for powder cocaine possession (Beaver, 2009). To address this sentencing disparity the Obama administration passed the Fair Sentencing Act of 2010. The fair sentencing act reduced the 100:1 sentencing ratio to 18:1. In addition, the new law also abolished the controversial and racially disadvantageous five-year mandatory minimum sentence for mostly Black drug offenders who were charged with possession of crack cocaine.

Charitable Choice and the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Partnerships

Presidential executive orders to foster a tandem relationship between cabinet agencies of government and faith-based organizations towards proffering solutions to drug-related mass incarceration have been in place for the last decade. Starting with former President George W. Bush, the White House Office of Faith-Based Initiatives was established in 2001, and the office is now rebranded in President Obama's administration as the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships (DiIulio, 2009). Succinctly the charitable choice is specifically section 104 of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, and signed into law by President Clinton in August 1996 (Sherwood, 1998, 2000). The charitable choice provision as it is popularly labeled, offers faith-based social service organizations an equal playing field with secular social service agencies to compete for federal tax dollars towards provision of social services (See Sherwood, 1998, 2000; Cnaan and Boddie, 2002).

One of the many benefits of the charitable choice provision is the maintenance of the religious identity of the faith-based social service providers (Sherwood, 2000; Cnaan and Boddie, 2002). A major concern of the critics of the charitable choice provision is the potential of crossing the borderline of the constitutional paradigm of separation of church and state (Sherwood, 2000). However, the charitable choice provision curbs against proselytizing when clients utilize services provided by tax-funded FBOs program, or when FBOs collaborate with governments and secular social service agencies in the provision of social service initiatives to address the myriad of social problems (Sherwood, 1998, 2000; Cnaan and Boddie, 2002). An offshoot of this initiative is the collaboration between the Department of Justice's Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships (DOJ CFBNP) (see http://www.ojp.gov/fbnp/about.htm). What follows is a discussion of some of the Black Church initiatives towards mitigating the mass incarceration of Blacks.

Evidences of Black Churches' Strategies to address the Drug-Related Incarceration

Black churches have been recognized as strategically positioned and influential institutions that can provide empowering socioeconomic and cultural assets to address the plethora of social vices confronting African Americans (Moore, 2011). Against this backdrop, Black churches have been involved for the last 42 years in intervening within the continuum of prevention and rehabilitation interventions for drug-related incarcerated Black males. While evidence abounds in literature on the various re-integration and reentry programs for Black males post-imprisonment, there is a great literature lacuna on the prevention spectrum (Durlauf & Nagin, 2011; Nagin, 1998).

Prevention Strategies

However, some momentum is building in the Black Church in the prevention sphere based on the work of Michelle Alexander (2010), and her book: *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. For instance, in the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Fredrick, Maryland, which is a predominantly White church with few Black congregants, sermons and congregation-wide book adoption are being used for "consciousness raising " of congregants to the sentencing disparity and disproportionality of Black male mass incarceration (Gregg, 2013).

Moreover, Newhouse (2011) reported that networks of Black churches working with the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference (a nonprofit group) are coordinating and incorporating into church bulletins fact sheets about mass incarcerations, scriptural quotations, and a new Jim Crow study guide that educates Black congregations on the need for a mass movement to stem the tide of mass incarceration among Blacks in the U.S. In an interview with Iva Carruthers, she stated that "mass incarceration is a moral and civil rights issue that the Black faith community cannot ignore "(Newhouse, 2011, para.4). Carruthers suggested that the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference coordinate with Black churches to educate the Black faith community about mass incarceration through such events as the Juneteenth, and Father's Day events, book clubs, youth town meetings, and a rally at the St. Sabina Catholic Church in Chicago (Newhouse, 2011). Next, the authors discuss reentry interventions that Black churches have adopted to help reintegrate Black males and reverse the high recidivism rate of recently released former Black male inmates.

Reentry and Anti-Recidivism Church Programs

Black churches have been very proactive in developing reentry programs that provide psychosocial and economic reintegration interventions

for paroled Black males. The justification for reentry and anti-recidivism interventions is well supported. The Pew Charitable Trust (Pew Center on the States, 2011) reports that 45.5 percent of those paroled in 1999 were rear-rested within three years, while 43.3 percent of those released from prison in 2004 were re-institutionalized within three years. Examples of reentry and anti-recidivism programs in Black churches that show promise include the prison fellowship transition of prisoners (TOP) in Detroit, MI which uses a case management approach to help Black ex-offenders learn competencies such as family reunion, community and social institutional reintegration, and, perhaps most importantly, job search skills (O'Connor, Ryan, & Parikh, 1998). Another innovative program is the collaboration between Black churches and the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA)/Faith Partner-ships in Washington D.C. (Spies, Hendricks & McGinnis, 2008). According to Spies and colleagues, this program utilizes a church-based mentoring program that pairs an ex-offender (a mentee) with a church volunteer (a mentor) who assists the parolee with support such as friendship, clothing, transitional housing, substance abuse aftercare, independent living skills, and employment skill development (Spies, Hendricks, & McGinnis, 2008).

Implications for the Black Church and Incarcerated Young Black Males

This paper underscores the premise that the Black Church occupies a unique position of power and influence in the African American community and as such serves as a beacon for social and political reform (Brown, et al., 2006). In order to address the mass incarceration of young Black males due directly or indirectly to drug-related issues, considerable changes in current social and political positions of many Black churches are required.

One suggestion is to work through the various national men's minis-tries that are currently in place within the church. For instance, Promise Keepers, Men of Integrity, the National Coalition of Ministries to Men (NCMM), or the Iron Men Ministry, are all organizations of men formed to address issues that affect the family. Currently, chemical dependency is an issue that plagues many Black families (Pope, Wallhagen, & Davis 2010).

Therefore, a suggested common focus of these men's ministries would entail educating congregations about chemical dependency and arming them with the facts on the disproportionate number of young Black males who are in the criminal justice system either directly or indirectly due to substance abuse-related issues. For example, churches could develop and facilitate weekly group therapy sessions for its members led by substance abuse professionals. In addition, churches could sponsor family therapy sessions, as substance abuse affects the entire family. Likewise, the church could develop a curriculum on substance abuse education for the youth ministries with a focus on prevention.

Another major effect of substance abuse is the legal ramifications. In order to address the disproportionality issues that lead to criminal records, African American churches could work with the court system to hold expungement clinics. These clinics are a coalition of volunteers such as attorneys, judges, law students, county officials, and other agencies who work with offenders to get their criminal records expunged at no charge to the offender. These programs are currently active across the country and help to increase the chances for offenders to obtain employment.

Another step would be to solicit the support of national Black Church organizations. For instance, the Congress of National Black Churches has over 20 million members (The White House, n.d), the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. has over 7.5 million members (World Council of Churches, 2013), and the National Black Church Initiative (NBCI) has approximately 34,000 associate members of Black and Latino churches across the U.S. (National Black Church Initiative, 2013). These organizations address various issues that improve the communities of their constituents and thus improve the lives of community residents.

There are a few ways for these organizations to have greater impact. For example, community revitalization initiatives are taking place across the country. African American churches could solicit support from government and corporate entities to bring business and housing to their neighborhoods and thus providing employment opportunities and adequate housing for residents. An example of this alliance could be found in the Woodlawn community in Chicago Illinois. The City of Chicago secured a $30.5 million grant to revitalize the Woodlawn community. This grant was awarded from the Choice Neighborhoods Initiative grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Preservation of Affordable Housing (POAH). This grant, coupled with the revitalization sponsored by local churches, has made Woodlawn a model community.

This suggested alliance of Black Church organizations is similar to the development of the coalition between the Congress of Racial Equality, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the National Urban League, which combined for the 1963 March on Washington for jobs and freedom (Jones, 2010). Likewise, this approach is analogous to other grassroots movements that have led to widespread social and policy changes. Examples of these movements include the Women's Suffrage Movement that led to societal change for the status of women (Beck, Dorsey, & Stutters, 2003), and the prohibition of alcohol, a movement that banned the sale and use of alcohol (Rumbarger, 1989). The Montgomery Bus Boycott gave birth to the civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s that led to massive changes in the rights of African Americans across the U.S. (Tarrow, 1994). The farm workers movement led by Cesar Chavez improved conditions

for farm workers in the U.S. (Young, 1972), and more recently, grassroots participation in the reform of healthcare ultimately led to "Obamacare."

Each of these movements has roots in empowerment theory, thus empowering people to enact social change (Rappaport, 1987; Solomon, 1976). More important, most grassroots movements are led by people who want to initiate changes in issues that negatively affect certain groups of people or society as a whole. Unfair treatment of young Black males by the judicial system that enforces unjust policies for drug related offenses is a cause that would benefit from a substantial revision.

The Office of the National Drug Control Policy was charged with producing an annual drug control strategy. This strategy, "outlines Administration efforts to reduce illicit drug use, manufacturing and trafficking, drug-related crime and violence, and drug-related health consequences" (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2013). We assert that some of these laws designed to address drug-related crimes unjustly punish young Black males. One such policy is the mandatory drug sentencing laws instituted during the 1980s during the war on drugs campaign. This law enables the judicial system to incarcerate offenders to prescribed terms for certain drug-related offenses. The mandatory minimum sentencing laws and the "Three Strikes Law" unjustly affects Blacks, oftentimes for minor drug offences. Consequently, these laws have been the focus of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) because they disproportionally affect minorities (www.aclu.org/criminal-law-reform/drug-sentencing-and-penalties). Perhaps a grassroots movement led by Black ministers fighting unjust drug policy that has the support of the ACLU could prove as successful as the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s, which were led by Black ministers and supported by the ACLU.

Moreover, we suggest that increasing male membership in the Black Church is essential for preventing an increase in unjust incarcerations of young Black males. For instance, NBCI has an initiative now underway that has a goal of recruiting ten million Black men across the country to join a church. They hope to accomplish this goal by understanding the spiritual, sociological, and psychological factors that keep men out of church. An initiative like this one can be replicated by local churches across the nation. In a study of 2,358 young Black males, researchers found that church attendance is a protective factor against criminal activity, including drug use and drug dealing (Johnson, Lareson, DeLi, & Jang, 2000). Similarly, Merrill, Folsom, and Christopherson (2005) revealed that family involvement in church (as measured by attendance) also serves as a protective factor against adolescent substance use. The common thread that connects the fabric of social and policy change is education about the current issues that affect the lives of Black people. The largest gathering of Black people takes place throughout the country every Sunday in church. There are over 150,000 Black churches in the U.S. and 87% of all African Americans are affiliated

with religious organizations (The National Black Church Initiative, 2013; Sahgal & Smith, 2009; Billingsley, 1992). During this captive time, pastors can dedicate some of the time on educating the congregation on the cause and effects of chemical dependency and what the church can do to address this major social problem.

Conclusion

The Black Church continues to fulfill a major role in the lives of Black people and as such has an enormous responsibility for improving their lives by advocating for and helping to make social and policy changes. Its work in effecting change in the current judicial and legislative policies on illegal drug-related activity can help to eliminate the disparity that currently exists in the judicial system as it relates to the inordinate number of young Black males who are interned for drug related offences. The experience of incarceration often has a deleterious effect on these young men who, while imprisoned, often suffer physical, psychological, and emotional abuse, isolation, and anxiety and depression brought on by feelings of hopelessness and grief (Perry, Alexander, Moore, & Robinson (2011). Black pastors and church leaders often have almost unquestioned authority within their congregations and are therefore uniquely positioned to use the pulpit and other church related forums as vehicles for education, transformation and social reform.

The problems within the Black community are many, and the urgency for solutions to the issues that beset young Black males is great. Just as Christ turned Lazarus' situation from one of death to life, the Black Church is perhaps the primary vehicle through which Divine intervention can come to also raise young Black males, especially those who have been incarcerated for drug-related offences, from deadly to life sustaining situations. Reentry and reintegration programs can prove invaluable by giving these males the tools necessary to build new and restore broken interpersonal relationships, obtain the necessary skills to provide for themselves and significant others, and feel a sense of life purpose and connection to their community. Providing services aimed at assisting these young men also increases the likelihood that they will develop into responsible men who can become heads of households, role models, pillars within the community and who will themselves be in a position to help the Black Church carry on its unquestionable significance within its community and the at-large society. ❖

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Sharon E. Moore, *Ph.D., M.S.W., Professor, Raymond A. Kent School of Social Work, 214 Oppenheimer Hall, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY 40292. Phone: (502) 852-0751. Email: semoor02@exchange.louisville.edu.*

A. Christson Adedoyin, *Ph.D., MSW, Associate Professor, School of Public Health, Department of Social Work, Samford University, 800 Lakeshore Drive, Birmingham, AL 35229. Phone: (205) 726 4661.*

Michael A. Robinson, *PhD, MSSW LCAS-A, Assistant Professor, University of Georgia, School of Social Work, 279 Williams St., Athens, Georgia. 30602. Email: robinsonmi@ecu.edu.*

Daniel A. Boamah, *MSSW, MA, LCSW, Raymond A. Kent School of Social Work, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY 40292. Phone: 270- 320-1101. Email: daboam01@louisville.edu.*